Peter Frick

Understanding Bonhoeffer

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Preface

This monograph is a collection of sixteen essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) that I wrote between 2007 and 2014. During that time I was a member of the Editorial Board that was responsible for the translation and publication of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (*DBW*) into the English standard edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English* (*DBWE*). This project was carried out under the auspices of the International Bonhoeffer Society in cooperation with Fortress Press. As part of the work of the Editorial Board I became passionately fascinated with the life, ideas and theology of Bonhoeffer. I worked my way methodically through every page of the 16 volumes of *DBW*. Not only did I diligently underline every page as I progressed, I also kept many notes on Bonhoeffer's life and thought. More and more, these notes morphed into a deepening understanding of who Bonhoeffer was and why he developed the unique theology that he did during the difficult years of the Nazi regime. The time commitment, intellectual perseverance and labour necessary to work my way through nearly 10.000 pages of text was daunting – but in the end all worthwhile. I think it is a fair conclusion to say that without encountering Bonhoeffer's thought and life I would not have been able to clarify my own theology and life journey.

Initially, my approach was simply to let his works take hold of my own theological mind, reflect on his ideas, attempt to sort them out and, most of all, arrive at an *understanding* of where he was coming from and what the significance of his theological ideas may be for us contemporary readers. The answers to the question "where did Bonhoeffer come from" are reflected in the section "Backgrounding Bonhoeffer." Similarly, the question of contemporary significance is explored in the section "Foregrounding Bonhoeffer." The bridge between both of these sections is always the either explicit (as in the first three essays) or on the implicit focus on making intelligible Bonhoeffer's thinking.

When I use the term *understanding*, I do so in view of Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between explanation, to explain a thing (*erklären*) and understanding, to understand a larger context (*verstehen*).[1] This distinction, interestingly, is not the invention of the philosopher Dilthey, but has precursors in both the

[1] Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey, "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," in Gesammelte Schriften. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner 1964, vol. 5, 332–336.

Puritan and Pietistic traditions.[2] Explanation and understanding are not necessarily juxtaposed or mutually exclusive ways of approaching a subject matter, in our case, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. They rather point to a hermeneutical dynamic, namely the correlation between particular insights and details within a larger matrix of sense-making and understanding. As I said elsewhere,[3] understanding always implies more than just understanding an author or a text. Precisely by understanding an author and his or her text does the reader encounter a new and deeper level in his or her own self-understanding. In my own case, by wanting to understand the thought of Bonhoeffer I encountered the freshness of his theology to the extent that it impacted my own self-understanding as a person and as a theologian. There is no doubt that the sustained encounter with Bonhoeffer's legendary life and dynamic theology has substantially shaped my own way of thinking and being. Something has happened in that encounter that is irreversible. And this is a good thing.

Given the fact that these essays were all published in various journals and books and followed dissimilar editorial, stylistic and bibliographic conventions, here all of these matters are standardized. Perhaps the most significant change is that all essays are updated to the critical text of the *DBWE*. When I wrote the first essays, many of the *DBWE* volumes were not yet published. In some cases I translated the German text of the *DBW* volumes myself into English, sometimes I used the German text without translation and sometimes I provided the reference to the *DBW* volumes in footnotes. All essays have now been updated and use the text of the *DBWE*. For scholars and readers interested in locating the German text in *DBW* it is quite possible to do so as the *DBWE* volumes have the page number of the corresponding *DBW* volume printed in the margin of each page. Cross-referencing between *DBWE* and *DBW* is thus quite user-friendly.

For the most part, the essays have been slightly revised, stylistically as necessary and at times in terms of content. Since scholarship is dynamic and does not stand still, I could have updated and added bibliographic material in a rather substantive manner. Nevertheless, both in view of keeping to the substance and form of the original essays, I decided to update the essays only sparingly in terms of bibliographic additions. These updates are simply added in the footnotes.

As I was preparing this book and worked my way through the various essays, I realized that there is much overlap between some of the essays. In fact, there is too much overlap for my own liking. However, rather than cutting material that overlaps, I accept that the reason for the overlap has to do with the original

[2] Cf. Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics. An Incarnational-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004, 104–107.

[3] Cf. the essay below: "Understanding Bonhoeffer: from Default to Hermeneutic Reading."

occasion of each essay. In other words, all essays have a context-specific history, a *Sitz im Leben*, in the academy and church. Some essays were written out of my early academic interest, others for journals. Yet most were written for particular occasions or invitations to contribute a chapter to a book, conference participation, or requests to present a lecture on Bonhoeffer with a given theme and focus. In some essays language is strictly academic, but in other essays language is deliberately non-academic in view of the audience.

In a sense these essays are like light houses along the sometimes foggy shores of Bonhoeffer's life and theology. The topics studied in these essays tell only a small part of Bonhoeffer's life and theology, but they were important questions to me in my journey through the vast corpus of his oeuvre and secondary literature. These studies helped me to situate Bonhoeffer in my quest for understanding. They do not tell the whole story and make no claims otherwise. I am quite aware of the fact that there is a great deal more of Bonhoeffer's thinking that I have not yet adequately examined and understood. Still, I trust that the reader will be encouraged to find his or her own enthusiasm in encountering Bonhoeffer by reading these essays. If they are of help in this regard, I am more than pleased.

Finally, I would like to thank all the original publishers for the permission to publish these essays again in slightly revised form. My gratitude also to Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, Klaus Hermannstädter, Philipp Henkys and Susanne Mang, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, for accepting these essays for publication and for their exemplary support throughout the entire production process. I would also like to thank Carmen Celestini for her work on the indices and her careful reviewing of the manuscript.

Last but not least, my wife and I would like to dedicate these pages with deepest affection to our friend Moni, whom we have known for more than half our lives.

Peter Frick Waterloo, 29 June 2016

Content

Understanding Bonhoeffer

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Engaging Intellect – Legendary Life

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer leads the list among the theologians of the 20th century known outside the theological world – ahead of even such eminent thinkers as Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann and Hans Küng. This is not to claim that the general public, or even the Christian public, knows much of Bonhoeffer's theological ideas. For those who have heard of him, Bonhoeffer is known for the fact that he was somehow connected to a circle of conspirators who planned to kill Hitler. But when that plan failed, he and others among the conspirators were murdered in a concentration camp at the end of World War II. In other words, Bonhoeffer is not principally known for his theological insights, but for his resistance to the evil Nazi regime and his death as a martyr. Given such civil courage, more his legacy than his theology made him into a kind of Christian saint or phenomenon.[1]

Nonetheless, the minimalist "knowledge" of Bonhoeffer as a conspirator and martyr amounts to a one-sided and ultimately deficient portrayal of his thought and life. Hence, the objective of this study is to present Bonhoeffer's thought, life and legacy in a succinct, even-handed and responsible manner. In order to achieve this objective, I will proceed as follows: first, I will sketch out the important lines of Bonhoeffer's biography in order to exemplify the dynamic correlation between his theology and actions; second, I will examine the decisive milestones of his theological thinking and development; and third, I will briefly comment on his legacy.

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[1] Stephen Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2004.

Bonhoeffer's Life: A Biographical Sketch

Given the vast corpus of secondary literature on Bonhoeffer, a comment on available biographies is in order. The most authoritative biography on Bonhoeffer is that of Eberhard Bethge,[2] Bonhoeffer's closest friend and brother-in-law. As it is written "from within" the Bonhoeffer family circle, this biography is the oldest (originally published in 1967) and most comprehensive biography, regarded by many scholars as the classic work on Bonhoeffer. The recent more popular work by Eric Metaxas,[3] although written in an appealing style, claims Bonhoeffer for a conservative American audience. A good middle-ground between Bethge in terms of length and Metaxas in terms of impartiality are the works of Josef Ackermann[4] and Ferdinand Schlingensieben.[5] Solid introductions to Bonhoeffer are also the works of Plant[6] and Clements.[7]

The Bonhoeffer Family

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, then Germany, on 4 February 1906, as the sixth of eight children. In 1912 the family moved to Berlin when his father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was appointed to the prestigious position of psychiatry at the University of Berlin and also as the head of the university hospital Charité. With a quiet but strong personality the father left a deep impression on his children. One of the things Dietrich Bonhoeffer remembers from his father was his distaste for the "phraseological" in favour of the "real." Karl Bonhoeffer's mother, Julie Bonhoeffer, lived with the Bonhoeffer family in the same household. It is said that when the Nazis declared an official boycott of Jewish stores in 1933, the 91 year old woman walked past the SS guards into the Jewish department store *Kaufhaus des Westens* "to demonstrate against this injustice."[8] Paula Bonhoeffer, Dietrich's mother, came from a noble family that was shaped to some degree by

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[2] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologian, Christian, Man of his Time. A Biography*, translated and revised by Victoria Barnett. Minnesota: Fortress Press 2000.

[3] Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson 2010.

[4] Josef Ackermann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Freiheit hat offene Augen. Eine Biografie*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag 2006.

[5] Ferdinand Schlingensieben, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945. Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, translated by Isabel Best. London/New York: T & T Clark 2010.

[6] Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*. New York: Continuum 2004.

[7] Keith Clements, *Bonhoeffer*. London: SPCK Publishing 2010.

[8] Schlingensieben, *Bonhoeffer*, 8.

Lutheran pietism. Her father, Dietrich's grandfather, was a chaplain at the court of Emperor Wilhelm II. But when he protested against the Emperor's description of the proletariat as "rabble," he promptly lost his job. Evidently, the young Bonhoeffer had ample opportunity to witness the stories of civil courage modeled by his grand-parents, a trait that he himself was called to emulate in his own life.

On the whole, the Bonhoeffer family was at best nominally Christian; they observed the Christian rituals of baptism and confirmation and celebrated the high holidays. Paula Bonhoeffer attended church, but none of the men in the family. The ideals of the family did not stem from their Christian heritage as they were humanistic, bourgeois and intellectual. This meant that respect for human beings, their rights and dignity were assumed in the household. Similarly, culture – including literature, music, art – was very important to the family, as was education. Indeed, all the Bonhoeffer children studied at university and all the men earned doctorates, as did the brothers-in-law that joined the family.

University of Berlin

For the Bonhoeffers' the intellectual fountain was the University of Berlin. Today historians of science suggest that in the 1920s and 1930s, the University of Berlin was the scientific center of the world. By the mid-1930s, Berlin had 28 Nobel Laureates (at that time, Harvard University had three). From the father to almost all the children, the family was connected to the university during this glorious period. For example, Karl Friedrich, the oldest Bonhoeffer son, worked with Walther Nernst as his doctoral supervisor when the latter became a Nobel laureate in chemistry. As a post-doctoral researcher, Karl Friedrich worked with Fritz Haber who received the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1918 and who was one of the best friends of Albert Einstein – who still taught at Berlin when Dietrich Bonhoeffer matriculated – himself Nobel laureate in physics in 1921.

The young Bonhoeffer was brilliant himself: he finished his doctoral dissertation at the age of 21, with a work entitled *Sanctorum Communio* (*DBWE* 1) that he had written on the side of his regular studies! Even by Berlin standards, he had achieved much at an early age. Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer's career began with a surprise when as a mere 14 years old he announced to the family that he was going to become "a minister and theologian," and apparently "he never seems to have wavered in this ambition."[9]

[9] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 36.

This decision was more tolerated than supported by the family. Especially his father would have preferred that the youngest son follow in the footsteps of his brothers and study physics or law, at any rate, a scientific discipline.

Barcelona, New York, Berlin, London

In 1928, Bonhoeffer went for a year to Barcelona as an assistant pastor to serve a German Lutheran congregation. On his way there he visited a mass in Paris that was attended by prostitutes and marginalized persons. This experience left "an enormously impressive picture" on the young pastor as "these burdened people are [close] to the heart of the gospel."[10] These words bear witness to one of the earliest expressions of Bonhoeffer's growing social conscience. From now on, the number of burdened people in his life was to increase. More and more, Bonhoeffer's eyes were opened to a reality that he called the "social question."[11] In one of his sermons of the time he proclaims: "Christians are people of the present in the most profound sense. Be it political and economic problems, moral and religious decline, concern for the present generation of young people – everywhere the point is to enter into the problems of the present."[12] When he returned to Berlin, he wrote a second dissertation, *Act and Being* (*DBWE* 2), in which he took on a host of German philosophers, including Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and others. This dissertation (*Habilitation*) qualified him to become a university professor.

In 1930–1931 Bonhoeffer studied in New York, at Union Theological Seminary. While there, we observe a subtle yet noteworthy terminological change in his classification of social realities. Whereas in Barcelona he had spoken broadly of the "social question," now in New York, he speaks more narrowly of the "social problem."[13] For the first time Bonhoeffer witnessed that racism and poverty stem from injustice and inevitably lead to social inequity and evil. Now he saw that social problems bring about terrific existential hardship, distress, discrimination, dysfunction, and all kind of

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[10] *DBWE* 10, 59.

[11] *DBWE* 10, 62 and 69. The social question emerged as Bonhoeffer witnessed both the extravagance of the German business community (cf. *DBWE* 10, 69 and 78), human hardship (cf. *DBWE* 10, 78: financial difficulties) and social marginality (cf. *DBWE* 10, 110. He encountered globetrotters, vagrants, escaped criminals, hired killers, legionnaires, circus performers, dancers).

[12] *DBWE* 10, 529.

[13] *DBWE* 10, 307.

attacks on life. At stake was not academic theology or neutral social realities, but human lives; hence, Bonhoeffer realized that theology must address social problems in a way that facilitates social transformations.

While Bonhoeffer's theology gains new perspectives at Union, he was himself transformed as a person. In 1936, Bonhoeffer wrote a rather atypical letter to Elisabeth Zinn about his own path from theology to becoming a Christian. Looking back at the years 1929–31 – in other words, at the time in Barcelona, Berlin and New York – Bonhoeffer acknowledges that "something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible … I had often preached, I had seen a great deal of the church, spoken and preached about it – but I had not yet become a Christian."[14]

When Bonhoeffer visited America in 1930, slavery had been abolished for over six decades. Nonetheless, the issue of racism was still a palpable social evil, blatantly evident to the young German visitor. At Union, Bonhoeffer befriended Franklin Fisher, an African American student from Alabama. This friendship became crucial not only for his first-hand experience of the racist reality encountered by the African American community, but also for his own ability to unmask anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. Fisher introduced Bonhoeffer to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and arranged that the German friend could teach Sunday school, offer Bible studies for women and help out in "weekday school." As an active participant he was welcomed into many African American homes and even introduced to the leaders of the black movement at Howard College.[15] On 8 January 1931 he wrote home: "The separation of whites from blacks in the southern states really does make a rather shameful impression … The way the southerners talk about the Negroes is simply repugnant, and in this regard the pastors are no better than the others … It is a bit unnerving that in a country with so inordinately many slogans about brotherhood, peace, and so on, such things still continue completely uncorrected."[16]

Back in Berlin in 1931, something happened that from then on shaped the direction of his life forever: the rise to power by Hitler in January 1933. The entire Bonhoeffer family was of one accord: Hitler meant no good news for Germany! On 1 February 1933 – two days after Hitler came to power – the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 3 days short of his twenty-seventh birthday, gave a public radio broadcast in which he warned the young

[14] Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 205.
[15] Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 205.
[16] *DBWE* 10, 269.

generation of the danger that the leader could become the misleader! Almost immediately, Hitler showed his true colours in April 1933 with the so-called Aryan Paragraph, a policy that was to restrict non-Aryans from holding the office of civil servant. This measure included professors and pastors and hence his brother-in-law, Gerhard Leibholz, who was a professor of law, and his best friend, Franz Hildebrandt, a Christian pastor with Jewish roots. Bonhoeffer instantly saw through this first act of "ethnic cleansing" and responded by issuing a clear condemnation.[17] He reminded those in the church that "here the most intelligent people have totally lost both their heads and their Bible."[18] As a protest and corrective, he wrote the essay "The Church and the Jewish Question." If the state fails "to create law and order" and attacks the Jewish people, he argued, then one of the possibilities for "the church" is to destroy the wheel of that machine.[19]

In retrospect, Bonhoeffer's writings are the earliest documents of the German church struggle. But others as well, for example Martin Niemoeller, a pastor in Berlin, realized early on that the "German Christians" would not resist Hitler. Therefore, he and Bonhoeffer and others formed what is known as the Pastors' Emergency League. Initially, 3000 of the 18000 pastors in Germany joined this association in protest against the German Christians, the National church controlled by Nazi ideology. The Pastors' Emergency League, increasingly known as the Confessing Church, drafted under the leadership of Karl Barth the earliest memorandum against the German Christians. In this document, known as "The Barmen Declaration" of May 1934, the Confessing Church set itself distinctly apart from the German Christians by declaring allegiance only to Jesus Christ and his word.

As the church struggle intensified, Bonhoeffer left Berlin and went to London (1933–1935) to serve as the pastor for a German Lutheran congregation. There he met Bishop George Bell, who became a life-long friend and confidant. Through him Bonhoeffer was connected to the world-wide ecumenical councils and later, during his activity as a conspirator, kept the allies informed of the activity of the resistance groups within Germany.

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[17] Cf. *DBWE* 12, 425–432.
[18] *DBWE* 12, 101.
[19] *DBWE* 12, 361–370.

Underground Seminary and Continued Church Struggle

While Bonhoeffer was in London, the Confessing Church established its own seminaries, an act that was illegal by Nazi law. In 1935 Bonhoeffer agreed to become the director of the seminary, first in Zingst then in Finkenwalde, on the coast of the Baltic Sea. In retrospect he notes that the time with the students during these two years was perhaps the most fulfilling time of his adult life. The basic objective of the seminary was to prepare students – who had for the most part already studied theology at a Nazi controlled faculty of theology – for the pastorate in congregations that belonged to the Confessing Church. For the students this meant the highest kind of sacrifice: first, to study theology at an underground seminary run by the Confessing Church was a crime; and second, it implied an uncertain economic future because the pastors of the Confessing Church had forfeited their status and salary as civil servants.

As the director of the seminary, Bonhoeffer was the chief architect of the theological curriculum. Solid and disciplined academic work was the norm. But equally significant was for Bonhoeffer the practice of Christian community. It was one thing to be a good theologian, but quite another to have a firm spiritual foundation. Hence, spiritual formation and theological education went hand in hand. The two classic books, *Discipleship* (*DBWE* 4) and *Life Together* (*DBWE* 5) have their origin in this community of seminarians.

At the seminary, Bonhoeffer met Eberhard Bethge who became his closest friend, brother-in-law and – posthumously – the redactor of his writings. It is questionable how much the world would know of Bonhoeffer's life and thought without Bethge. He not only wrote a monumental biography[20] but also initiated the publication of the critical edition of Bonhoeffer's writings, the 17-volume *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, a series now completed in its English translation, the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English*.

After the Nazis had closed the seminary in 1937, Bonhoeffer visited New York a second time in 1939 in order to escape his immanent conscription into Hitler's armies. In New York he realized that he had escaped from family, church and country when he was needed the most in times of extreme national upheaval. He returned to Germany with the last ocean liner in July 1939, fully aware of what would await him: war.

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[20] Cf. note 2.

Conspiracy and Imprisonment

Bonhoeffer was well informed by his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, who was a lawyer in the Counter Intelligence Office in Berlin (the *Abwehr*), of the ever-increasing acts of brutality by the Nazi regime against Jewish people and other regime critics. Almost from the beginning, Dohnanyi secretly compiled a "chronicle of shame" in which he listed Nazi atrocities against Jews as they became known to him in his office. He did this in view of the needed post-war evidence against the Nazi regime. Through Dohnanyi's clandestine initiative, the Bonhoeffer family was informed of what was actually happening in Nazi Germany. Dohnanyi persuaded a small cluster of people to take action against the regime – and this meant against Hitler. After many discussions – many of which took place in the Bonhoeffer House – the group saw the only solution to overcome the evil of Nazism in a carefully planned coup on Hitler's life. The circle of conspirators recruited by Dohnanyi included Dietrich, his brother Klaus, their brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher and a number of high military and intelligence officials who worked closely together with Dohnanyi.

When Bonhoeffer joined the circle of conspirators he had in all practical terms become a double agent. On the one hand, it looked now as if he actually worked for the Nazis, since he was associated with the counter intelligence offices in Berlin and Munich. On the other hand, the real purpose of his assignment was the very opposite: to inform the allied nations of the plans of the conspirators and to negotiate their cooperation after the defeat of the Nazi regime. The key international contact in this regard was Bishop George Bell. Following a meeting with Bonhoeffer in Sweden, Bell was not successful in securing understanding and support for the conspirators from the British government. Neither Anthony Eden, British foreign minister, nor Winston Churchill were inclined to concede anything to Germany but unconditional surrender. This was a severe and bitter blow to the conspirators!

When Bonhoeffer was not traveling in Europe for the Counter Intelligence Office, he was preoccupied with a project of an entirely different nature. From November 1940 until February 1941, Bonhoeffer lived at the Benedictine Monastery in Ettal, south of Munich. Why was he there? For two reasons: to be in close proximity to the Munich office and to write a book on ethics. Given the context of the tyranny of the state and the inability of the Confessing Church to critique it publicly and effectively, the issue of ethical responsibility became perhaps the most demanding concern for him. Urged on by these unusual times Bonhoeffer wrote a book on

ethics, posthumously published as *Ethics* (*DBWE* 6). For Bonhoeffer, who had over the years become a pacifist and supporter of nonviolent resolutions of international conflicts, the involvement in tyrannicide posed a particularly serious ethical predicament. Those who think of Bonhoeffer as a great Christian example are somehow able to reconcile his involvement in the conspiracy with the rest of his faith and actions; for others, this very involvement becomes the cornerstone of suspicion toward Bonhoeffer, if not a flat-out rejection of him. How he ethically justified his participation in tyrannicide we will discuss below.

On 5 April 1943, Bonhoeffer – now engaged to Maria von Wedemeyer, nearly 20 years younger than him – was arrested by the Gestapo in his parents' retirement home in Berlin. Up to that moment he had been working on the manuscript for Ethics. The reason for his arrest was not directly related to his involvement in the conspiracy. Dohnanyi's office was scrutinized for inconsistencies in official documents, foreign currency transactions and other such matters. After Dohnanyi was arrested, the documents in his office led to Bonhoeffer who was arrested the same afternoon and incarcerated in Tegel Prison. Against what Bonhoeffer had hoped for, he was not released after a short while. As time went on, he befriended a guard who smuggled letters in and out of prison. At one point there was even an escape plan; but Bonhoeffer gave it up when his brother Klaus and brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher were also arrested.

Bonhoeffer's experience in prison is recorded in the now famous *Letters and Papers from Prison* (*DBWE* 8). In these pages – mostly an exchange of personal and theological letters with his friend Eberhard Bethge – Bonhoeffer reflects on his life and imagines the future. His reflections may be broadly divided into two categories: one was his personal life (family, marriage) and the other was his theological reflections. His overarching question was how Jesus Christ can be proclaimed in a secular and autonomous world (*mündige Welt*); does theology have to learn a new language, one that proclaims biblical concepts in "religionless" terminology?

It was not meant to be for him to regain his freedom, his family and a wife. In October 1944 Bonhoeffer was brought to a Gestapo prison in Berlin, then moved to Buchenwald Concentration Camp and finally transferred to Flossenbürg Concentration Camp. There, after a mock trial the night before, Bonhoeffer was hung early in the morning on 9 April 1945, a month before World War II was over.

Why this biographical sketch? Although it is tautological to say that all theology is contextual, in the case of Bonhoeffer such insight is paramount. Given the extraordinary difficult circumstances of his adult life, his

thought was inextricably bound to emerge, develop and mature in the midst of the church struggle and the attempt to see the Nazi regime come to its end.

Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation

Theology, Philosophy, Ethics and Homiletics

I will now present the main intellectual presuppositions that undergird and shape Bonhoeffer's thought in its complexity and entirety – his theology, his philosophy, ethics and homiletics. It is crucial to understand that these presuppositions are not to be correlated sequentially but concurrently. In other words, Bonhoeffer did not begin studying one discipline or formulate these presuppositions and then move to the next, and so on; rather, he engaged all of these disciplines and thus articulated these presuppositions in view of gaining a comprehensive theological understanding as an educator and pastor.

Basic Theological Presupposition: Christuswirklichkeit

Many scholars hold the position that Bonhoeffer's most basic theological presupposition is the concept of reality or, in his own term, *Wirklichkeit*, or stated even more precisely, the concept *Christuswirklichkeit*, the reality of Christ. This presupposition cements and shapes all of Bonhoeffer's thought: his philosophy, theology, ethics and homiletics. As early as in his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer argued that "one can never arrive at the reality of the other by means of epistemology and metaphysics. Reality is simply not deducible, but given – to be acknowledged or rejected. It can never be explained theoretically; likewise it is only given for the whole person as an ethical being."[21] Even though Bonhoeffer speaks here of the reality of the human being, his conception of reality as "given" suggests that he assigned reality an overarching basic ontological structure[22] that defies both construction and deconstruction. Elsewhere he describes reality as "ultimate reality" and even identifies that ultimate real-

[21] *DBWE* 1, 53 note 68; Cf. *DBWE* 2, 66.

[22] Jürgen Moltmann, *Herrschaft Christi und soziale Wirklichkeit nach Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Munich: Chr. Kaiser 1959, 5, speaks correctly of a "theological ontology" in Bonhoeffer's early writings.

ity with God: "God alone is the ultimate reality."[23] This identification he explains in these terms: "That God alone is ultimate reality, is, however, not an idea meant to sublimate the actual world, nor is it the religious perfection of a profane worldview. It is rather a faithful Yes to God's self-witness, God's revelation."[24] In other words, for Bonhoeffer God's self-disclosure in the world is inextricably bound to the incarnation of Jesus. For him this means that "for a disciple of Jesus, 'God-given realities' exist only through Jesus Christ."[25] In addition, "only insofar as the ultimate reality is revelation, that is, the self-witness of the living God, is its claim to ultimacy fulfilled. But then the decision about the whole of life depends on our relation to God's revelation."[26]

Put differently, Bonhoeffer's basic theological presupposition is that all reality is constituted, centered and completed in Jesus Christ. From this presupposition follows for Bonhoeffer the conclusion that there exists no reality outside or apart from the one divine reality revealed in Christ. "The world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ."[27] All reality, whether primordial, ancient, modern or postmodern, is constituted by the one Christ-reality. In Bonhoeffer's scheme of ultimate reality as constituted by Christ, the question is not how Christ or Christianity fit into our contemporary reality but rather how the reality of our contemporary world measures up vis-à-vis the ultimate reality of God in Christ. Similarly, the question is not how the Christian faith should be made contemporary in the context of our postmodern lives, but how the postmodern person may be able to embrace the actuality of *Christuswirklichkeit*. For Bonhoeffer the logic of the relationship is this: the contemporary, postmodern subject must justify him/herself vis-à-vis *Christuswirklichkeit* and not the reverse. The sequence is such that the path of the human being must always lead to *Christuswirklichkeit*. There is, however, for Bonhoeffer no direct insight or path to the ultimate reality and knowledge of Christ. This brings us now to Bonhoeffer's understanding of philosophy.

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[23] *DBWE* 6, 48.
[24] *DBWE* 6, 48.
[25] *DBWE* 4, 95.
[26] *DBWE* 6, 48–49.
[27] *DBWE* 6, 58.

Basic Philosophical Presuppositions

Until recently, Bonhoeffer research has with few exceptions focussed on examining Bonhoeffer's theology. While the first six decades of research were characterized by an interest in Bonhoeffer's theology, it is only in recent years that due recognition is given to the philosophical influences that shaped Bonhoeffer's intellectual formation.[28] Indeed, as a student of theology in Tübingen, Bonhoeffer himself concentrated on the study of philosophy. He studied the history of philosophy, history of logic, formal logic and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. We also know that he read Nietzsche's work, much of Hegel, Dilthey and many other philosophers. The significance of Bonhoeffer's life-long interest in philosophy is in its correlation with theology. To articulate his basic philosophical presupposition is now our next task.

The Limited Self

Bonhoeffer's basic ontological category – that all reality is constituted and "given" by God in Jesus Christ – corresponds to a further ontological distinction with epistemological implications. In *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer argues that the one overarching reality includes the fact that no human being is "untouched by sin."[29] "Being in Adam" he says explicitly is an ontological designation for being a sinner. But being a sinner includes not only *cor curvum in se* (a heart turned in upon itself) but more significantly precludes the epistemological possibility "that human beings could place themselves into the truth."[30] In the end, the fact that the power of sin disfigures human life radically and on all levels of being makes null a person's ability to overcome the dilemma of life. The power of sin makes it impossible for a person to repair the broken relationship between God and humanity as sin makes it impossible even to perceive itself as sin. Why this epistemological impasse?

"Philosophical thinking," Bonhoeffer remarks, "attempts to be free from premises (if that is possible at all); Christian thinking has to be con-

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[28] Cf. Peter Frick (ed), *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation. Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*. Religion in Philosophy and Theology 29. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008 and Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (eds), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2009.

[29] *DBWE* 2, 136.

[30] *DBWE* 2, 136.

scious of its particular premise, that is, of the premise of the reality of God, before and beyond all thinking. In the protection of this presupposition, theological thinking convicts philosophical thinking of being bound also to a presupposition, namely, that thinking in itself can give truth. But philosophical truth always remains truth which is given only within the category of possibility.[31] Philosophical thinking never can extend beyond this category – it can never be a thinking in reality. It can form a conception of reality, but conceived reality is not reality any longer. The reason for this is that thinking is in itself a closed circle, with the ego as the center."[32] Elsewhere he says in a similar vein that in philosophical discourse, "the I, now thinking itself, simply becomes the point of departure instead of the limit-point of philosophy. But thinking cannot do this without losing two very different things, reality and transcendence, that is, the one through the other. Philosophy, thinking, the I, all come under the power of themselves, rather than transcendence … Thinking languishes in itself; precisely where it is free from the transcendent, from reality, there it is imprisoned in itself."[33]

Here Bonhoeffer discerns a decisive difference between basic philosophical and theological presuppositions. Theology is predicated on "the reality of God, before and beyond all thinking" while philosophy is falsely predicated on assuming "that thinking in itself can give truth." Unlike philosophy, theology reckons with truth in an ontological sense. Philosophy's weakness is that it wants to establish, if not truth itself, then at least minimally the parameter for truth to demonstrate itself. For Bonhoeffer such an attempt is in utter vain because philosophical truth is self-limited. "Godless thought – even when it is ethical – remains self-enclosed. Even a critical philosophy cannot place one into the truth, because its crisis emerges from within itself, and its apparent reality is still subservient to the claims of the *cor curvum in se* that have lost the power to claim anyone. Revelation gives itself without precondition and is alone able to place one into reality. Theological thought goes from God to reality, not from reality to God."[34] Precisely here lies for Bonhoeffer the hermeneutical dilemma in philosophy's claim: philosophical thinking is entrapped in the circle of sin and therefore

[31] Bonhoeffer vehemently rejects the category of possibility for theology. For its Heideggerian origin and Bonhoeffer's rejection of the category; cf. *DBWE* 2, 136; *DBWE* 1, 143 and *DBWE* 10, 403. See also my essay in this volume, "Bonhoeffer and Philosophy," especially the section on Heidegger.

[32] *DBWE* 10, 442.

[33] *DBWE* 2, 39.

[34] *DBWE* 2, 89.

Index of Subjects

Note: a page reference in italics indicates that a subject entry is only mentioned in the footnotes.

Index of Names

Note: a page reference in italics indicates that a person is only mentioned in the footnotes.