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## Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Within, not Outside, the Barthian Movement”

There can be no doubt that among Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s contemporaries Karl Barth was the theologian of highest importance for him, although Bonhoeffer never had studied with Barth. Trained in the tradition of liberal theology Bonhoeffer experienced the encounter with the new approach of Barth’s dialectical theology as a “liberation.”<sup>1</sup> During his stay at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930–31 he was perceived as a “disciple” of Barth, although at that time he had a reading knowledge of Barth’s theology only. According to Eberhard Bethge the first face-to-face meeting with Barth in July 1931 in Bonn had the result that “subsequent relations between the two were characterized by complete frankness and, occasionally, completely frank disagreement.”<sup>2</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s charge in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* against Barth of having mislead theology into what he calls “positivism of revelation” has become famous. The perception is wide-spread that Bonhoeffer was in search of an alternative to Barth’s approach in his quest for a “non-religious Christianity.” However, this is a misjudgement motivated by anti-Barthian prejudice rather than by a thorough reading of Bonhoeffer’s writings. The critical remarks on “positivism of revelation” are always introduced by eulogies on Barth’s approach. Bonhoeffer’s intention was not to overcome Barth’s theology but to develop some aspects within Barth’s approach in a way, which had not yet been carried out by Barth himself.

### *I. Bonhoeffer’s Early Reception and Discussion of Barth’s Theology*

Bonhoeffer’s first encounter with the theology of Karl Barth took place in the winter of 1924–1925. During a period of “several attacks of influenza”

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176.

he found time enough to “read more than ever,” among others the first volume of Barth’s essays *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1924) and probably also Barth’s commentary on Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* (second revised edition, 1922). The “liberation” experienced in the encounter with Barth’s writings led Bonhoeffer to a critical attitude regarding the liberal theology of his teachers.<sup>3</sup> In his seminar essay entitled “Can One Distinguish Between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics Relate to This Question?” (summer 1925) his reading experiences of Barth’s theology are reflected for the first time. According to Bonhoeffer every exposition has to start from the premise that revelation is contained in Scripture, “because this is where God speaks.”<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer adopts Barth’s programmatic epistemological principle: “Like can be understood only by like. God can be understood only by God.”<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer’s elaboration was marked by Reinhold Seeberg as being “satisfactory.” In his eyes the essay seems to have expressed “irritating ... Barthianism” only.<sup>6</sup>

The debate between Barth and Adolf von Harnack, the head of liberal theology, which was published in the journal “Die christliche Welt” (The Christian World) in 1923, must have been of special interest to Bonhoeffer, since he studied with Harnack since 1924.<sup>7</sup> In Harnack’s seminar on Augustin’s “De Civitate Dei” in winter 1925–26 Bonhoeffer seems to have quarrelled with the teacher about Barth’s exposition of 1 Corinthians – *The Resurrection of the Death* (1924).<sup>8</sup> Among Bonhoeffer’s papers are the dictated notes (transcripts) of Barth’s Göttingen dogmatics lectures (“Instruction in Christian Religion,” summer 1924 and winter 1924–1925), which were circulated at that time among students of theology. It seems that

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<sup>3</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 73f. Cf. Karl Barth, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich 1924; English translation, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Essays 1916–1923, translated by Douglas Horton (New York 1957)); *Der Römerbrief* (Munich, second revised edition, 1922; English translation *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London 1933)).

<sup>4</sup> “Can One Distinguish Between a Historical and a Pneumatological Interpretation of Scripture, and How Does Dogmatics Relate to This Question?,” in *DBWE* 9, 289 (*DBW* 9, 311).

<sup>5</sup> *DBWE* 9, 290–291 (*DBW* 9, 313). In his seminar paper on „Frank’s Understandings of the Spirit and of Grace” (19 November 1926, not contained in *DBW/E* 9!) Bonhoeffer again quotes Barth’s principle: “But finitum incapax infiniti, like is known only through like, God only through God’s spirit;” cf. A. Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge 2000), 16, note 3.

<sup>6</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 79; translation altered.

<sup>7</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 73f.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Helmut Goes, “Der Sichere und der Suchende,” in *Begegnungen mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by W.-D. Zimmermann (Munich, fourth extended edition, 1969), 34. Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 67.

Bonhoeffer “deplored Barth’s relapse into servitude” and feared a “reactionary gesture” in connection with his turn towards dogmatics.<sup>9</sup>

In his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* and particularly in his second dissertation *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer discussed Karl Barth at length.<sup>10</sup> *Sanctorum Communio* can be read as Bonhoeffer’s attempt at completing Barth’s “theology of revelation” with respect to sociality.<sup>11</sup> Therefore he chooses the subtitle: “A dogmatic inquiry into the sociology of the church” and coins the definition of the church as “Christ,” that is the revelation of God’s Word, “existing as church-community”, that is the social concretion of revelation.<sup>12</sup>

In *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer emphasized his basic agreement with the theological insight that “the Christian church is the church of the Word, that is, of faith,” an insight that had “been brought home to us by modern Luther research,” that is, by Karl Holl and the so-called Luther renaissance, as well as “by the most recent change of direction in theology,” that is, by Karl Barth and dialectical theology.<sup>13</sup> However, Bonhoeffer expresses a certain hesitation with respect to Barth stressing that the concept of the church cannot be “understood theologically ‘in itself’, but only within a real historical dialectic – not a dialectic of concepts.”<sup>14</sup>

Typically, Bonhoeffer holds it to be necessary to stress a point of difference with Barth in the understanding of the “other.” In the context of the exposition of the church as “spiritual community,” where Bonhoeffer reflects on the nature of Christian love as “real love of the neighbour” in the I-You relationship,<sup>15</sup> we find a footnote, where he discusses the ecclesiology and ethics of Barth’s commentary on the *Epistle to the Romans* (second edition). Bonhoeffer “cannot concur with the exegesis of the command to love presented here, nor with the concept of communication it entails.” One may well say with Barth that “the neighbour visibly poses the question of God that must be visibly answered.” But one must then also concede “that love really does love the other, not the One,” namely God

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<sup>9</sup> R. Widmann, Letter to D. Bonhoeffer (25 February 1926), in *DBWE* 9, 154 (*DBW* 9, 160). Cf. E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 178: “As he eagerly and gratefully absorbed Barth’s message during 1927 and 1929, Bonhoeffer directed a number of theological-epistemological questions toward Barth, under the principle of *finitum capax infiniti*.”

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids/ Cambridge, revised edition, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> *DBWE* 1, 121, 141, 189 (*DBW* 1, 76, 87, 126).

<sup>13</sup> *DBWE* 1, 212–213 (*DBW* 1, 143).

<sup>14</sup> *DBWE* 1, 62 (*DBW* 1, 36). Cf. the ninth of his theses for the doctoral examinations (17 December 1927): “The dialectic of the so-called dialectical theology bears logical, not real character and is in danger of neglecting the historicity of Jesus” (*DBWE* 9, 441 (*DBW* 1, 478)).

<sup>15</sup> *DBWE* 1, 169 (*DBW* 1, 109).

“in the other,” as Barth maintains.<sup>16</sup> Christian love, according to Bonhoeffer, is aimed at “*the real neighbour*,” it does not do so, because the possibility of integration into the Christian community lies dormant in the other or because it “would derive pleasure from that person’s individuality.” Christian love loves the neighbour, because “God’s claim” is experienced in the You.<sup>17</sup>

This yields the critical question: “Who gives Barth the right to say that the other is ‘as such infinitely unimportant’ ... when God commands us to love precisely that person? God has made the ‘neighbour as such’ infinitely important, and there isn’t any other ‘neighbour as such’ for us ... rather, the other is infinitely important as such, precisely because God takes the other person seriously. Should I after all ultimately be alone with God in the world?” Bonhoeffer perceives another difference with Barth in the understanding of Christian community: “‘To be one’ with God and with the neighbour is something entirely different from being in community with them. Barth, however, uses both expressions synonymously.” In the final analysis, Barth’s understanding of oneness, “where only the one is loved in the other,” ends up, according to Bonhoeffer, in “romanticism.”<sup>18</sup>

In the published version of *Sanctorum Communio* (1930) we find a new chapter on “Authority and Freedom in the Empirical Church,” which refers to Barth’s *Christian Dogmatics in Outline* (published in late summer 1927).<sup>19</sup> It seems that during his stay as an assistant pastor in Barcelona (1928–1929) Bonhoeffer had read Barth’s *Outline* with great interest.<sup>20</sup> Among Bonhoeffer’s papers are notes reflecting his critical reading, referring particularly to chapter 3: “The Sacred Scripture.”<sup>21</sup> Already the headline of the new chapter of *Sanctorum Communio*, which was to replace the chapter on “Church and Proletariat” of the original typescript, can be read as contraction of two headlines in Barth’s *Outline*: § 21 (“The Authority of the Church”) and § 22 (“The Freedom of Conscience”). Bonhoeffer refers to these two chapters in a footnote to the first sentence of his new chapter: “The church rests upon the word.”<sup>22</sup> Obviously the reading of Barth’s

<sup>16</sup> *DBWE* 1, 169–170, note 28 (*DBW* 1, 109–110, note 28).

<sup>17</sup> *DBWE* 1, 169 (*DBW* 1, 109).

<sup>18</sup> *DBWE* 1, 170, note 28 (*DBW* 1, 110–111, note 28).

<sup>19</sup> K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, volume 1: *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik (1927)* (Zurich, new edition 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Letter to Walter Dress, 13 March 1928, in *DBW* 17, 71. Bonhoeffer’s sermons and speeches in Barcelona show that he tried to explain Barth and dialectical theology, as he understood it, to members of the German community there (cf. *DBW* 10, 318–319 and 323).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 9, 436–438 (*DBW* 9, 473–475).

<sup>22</sup> *DBWE* 1, 250 (*DBW* 1, 172). Cf. K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 473 and 506. The same combination of authority and freedom can be found already in §§ 9 and 10 of Barth’s Göttingen dogmatics, which Bonhoeffer knew from the students’

*Christian Dogmatics in Outline* induced Bonhoeffer to qualify the nearly complete identification of Christ and church, as it had been suggested by the formula “Christ existing as community,” which could have provoked misunderstandings with respect to the demand of obedience to the church. The fact that “the church rests upon the word” should not be interpreted in a fundamentalist way; rather, it implies the freedom of a Christian. In contrast to the absolute authority of the Word, upon which the church rests, the church itself can claim only “relative authority.” Therefore it can demand “relative obedience” only, which allows at the same time “relative freedom” for the individual.<sup>23</sup>

After *Sanctorum Communio* had been published in second edition (1954) Barth praised Bonhoeffer’s dissertation in the context of his *Doctrine of Reconciliation*, where he speaks about “The Growth of the Community” in the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

More clearly and decisively than in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer tried to intervene into the contemporary theological debates in his *Habilitation* dissertation *Act and Being*. He “criticized Bultmann for his dependence on Heidegger” and he “criticized Barth for his formalistic understanding of the freedom of God.” Now Bonhoeffer “wanted to persuade him of his own belief in the *finitum capax infiniti* – that, despite everything, God was accessible.”<sup>25</sup> On the one hand Bonhoeffer admits that “the proviso made by dialectical theology is not a logical one that might be cancelled by the opposite but, in view of predestination, a real one in each case.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand he senses in Barth’s “attempt of unsystematic thought”<sup>27</sup> the danger that “the contingent positivity” of “the occurrence of salvation” be formalized<sup>28</sup> in that God is “understood as pure act.”<sup>29</sup> Bonhoeffer insists: “In revelation it is not so much a question of the freedom of God – eternally remaining within the divine self, aseity – on the other side of revelation, as it is of God’s coming out of God’s own self in revelation. It is a matter of God’s *given* Word, the covenant in which God is bound by God’s own action. ... God is free not from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God’s freedom. God *is* present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but – to put it quite provisionally for now – ‘haveable,’ graspable in

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transcripts (cf. K. Barth *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, volume I: *Prolegomena* (1924), edited by Hannelotte Reiffen (Zurich 1985), 276 and 305.

<sup>23</sup> DBWE 1, 250 (DBW 1, 172).

<sup>24</sup> K. Barth, *KD IV/2 (Die Lehre von der Versöhnung)*, 1955, 725.

<sup>25</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> DBWE 2, 86 (DBW 2, 80).

<sup>27</sup> DBWE 2, 87 (DBW 2, 81).

<sup>28</sup> DBWE 2, 124 (DBW 2, 122).

<sup>29</sup> DBWE 2, 83 (DBW 2, 77).

the Word within the church. Here the formal understanding of God's freedom is countered by a substantial one."<sup>30</sup>

Interestingly, in this passage Bonhoeffer protests as a Lutheran theologian against the Reformed "*non capax*." Yet, Bonhoeffer's purpose is similar to Barth's, namely, to shake up the theological system. In Bonhoeffer's view the disturbance is to arise from Christ, whom he thinks as "existing as community."<sup>31</sup> It is in the congregation where "God's freedom" manifests itself precisely in that "God binds God's self to human beings," and that "the revelation is somehow held fast here."<sup>32</sup> If this is true, the question of the "continuity of revelation" raises itself unavoidably. It is obviously not sufficient for Bonhoeffer to say with Barth that God's revelation "impinges on the existence" of the listening human being "in each instance." Rather, everything depends on revelation being "always present (in the sense of 'what is in the future')." <sup>33</sup> For "it is only in the community of faith itself that revelation can be understood in its real, existence-affecting being." In this context Bonhoeffer even goes so far as to assert that in the congregation "every member of the church may ... 'become a Christ' to the others."<sup>34</sup>

It is not at all Bonhoeffer's intention in his insistence on „the continuity of revelation" to nullify Barth's repudiation of the ideas of continuity found in liberal theology. In his debate with Harnack, Barth had made clear: "You empty revelation by saying that there is a continuity between history and revelation... I do repudiate every continuity between hither and yon... Parable, parable only can be all 'becoming' in view of the birth from death to life."<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, too, is not concerned with the continuity between hither and yon, but with an endured, an imposed continuity in the opposite direction: from the there to the here, that is to say, from above to below. He could well endorse Barth's statement from the Tambach address, "always from above to below, and never the reverse, if we want to

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<sup>30</sup> DBWE 2, 90–91 (DBW 2, 85). Interestingly, in his essay on *The Humanity of God* (1956) Barth himself later allowed that, properly understood, "the deity of the living God" finds "its meaning and its power only in the context of His history and of His dialogue with humans, and thus in the *togetherness* with humans. ... It is precisely God's deity which, rightly understood, includes His *humanity*" (K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, translated by Thomas Wieser and John Newton Thomas (Richmond 1960), 44–45).

<sup>31</sup> DBWE 2, 112 (DBW 2, 108).

<sup>32</sup> DBWE 2, 112 (DBW 2, 109); translation altered.

<sup>33</sup> DBWE 2, 113 (DBW 2, 110).

<sup>34</sup> DBWE 2, 113 (DBW 2, 109).

<sup>35</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Adolf von Harnack, in: H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge 1972), 49.

understand ourselves rightly.”<sup>36</sup> But the Word really became flesh and, in Christ, “exists as community”; therefore, Bonhoeffer immediately ascribes a social and historical dimension to this vertically-from-above. “Thus revelation happens in the community of faith; it requires primarily a specific Christian sociology.”<sup>37</sup> For that reason, “how existentiality and continuity come together in the concept of *pati*” must be examined in relation to “the concept of the church.”<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, Bonhoeffer could not adopt for his purposes Barth’s statement in the Tambach address: “We live more deeply in the No than in the Yes, more deeply in criticism and protest than in naïveté, more deeply in longing for the future than in participation in the present.”<sup>39</sup> In relation to the church, Bonhoeffer would stress the exact opposite. In the community of faith, the naïveté of the child is quite possible; “Home is the community ... of Christ, always ‘future,’ present ‘in faith’ because we are children of the future.”<sup>40</sup> Here what is yet to come is already present and – albeit in a preliminary way – at our disposal “in faith.”<sup>41</sup>

According to Bonhoeffer, Barth’s “fateful mistake ... to have substituted for the concept of creator and lord that of the subject” was symptomatic of his formalization of God’s freedom. For that ultimately means that God is not understood “as person.”<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer insists that “the Protestant idea of the church is conceived in personal terms – that is, God reveals the divine self in the church as person... Hence, the gospel is somehow held fast here. God’s freedom has woven itself into this personlike community of faith, and it is precisely this which manifests what God’s freedom is: that God binds God’s self to human beings.”<sup>43</sup>

The acuity of the critique of Barth present in *Act and Being* should not deceive one into ranking Bonhoeffer with the colleagues at the Berlin faculty in their opposition to Barth. The converse is more likely: Precisely because he feels close to Barth – the many approvingly cited quotations

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<sup>36</sup> K. Barth, “The Christian’s Place in Society,” in: K. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York 1957), 324 (translation altered). In his lectures on “Recent Publications in Systematic Theology” (1932–1933) Bonhoeffer comments approvingly: “Human speech” concerning God “must take note of this from above to the below” (*DBW* 12, 154).

<sup>37</sup> *DBWE* 2, 113 (*DBW* 2, 109).

<sup>38</sup> *DBWE* 2, 116 (*DBW* 2, 113).

<sup>39</sup> K. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 311–312.

<sup>40</sup> *DBWE* 2, 161 (*DBW* 2, 161).

<sup>41</sup> *DBWE* 2, 112 (*DBW* 2, 109).

<sup>42</sup> *DBWE* 2, 125 (*DBW* 2, 122). Cf. K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, New Edition, 166: “It is quite simply the logical question about the subject, predicate and object of the little sentence: ‘God speaks,’ *Deus dixit*.” Note Barth’s comments (in *KD* 1/1, 340) on these “then in fact ... unguardedly and ambiguously” used words.

<sup>43</sup> *DBWE* 2, 112 (*DBW* 2, 109).

affirm this perception – Bonhoeffer endeavours to work out as clearly as possible the differences which nevertheless exist between them. In fact, he rather tries to keep in conversation with each other the controversial positions of Barth, on the one side, and those of the Berlin faculty, on the other. Thus, *Act and Being* can be regarded as “a masterpiece of mediating theology.”<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, in his inauguration lecture “The Question of Man in Contemporary Philosophy and Theology” (31 July 1930) Bonhoeffer on the one hand agrees with Barth’s interpretation of the “*incapax infinti*”: “the person to whom God reveals himself is the person to whom God cannot become manifest.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, he criticizes Barth’s dialectic in agreement with the personalistic concept of the I-You relationship as “speculative” and “individualistic.”<sup>46</sup>

## II. A “Barthian” in New York

During his stay at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1930–1931 Bonhoeffer presented himself so decidedly as an advocate of Barth’s theology that he was seen by John Baillie as “the most convinced disciple of Dr. Barth that had appeared among us up to that time.”<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer’s “Barthianism” becomes apparent in his seminar papers for Union Theological Seminary. In “Concerning the Christian Idea of God” Bonhoeffer explicitly refers to Barth, who had maintained that “theological thinking is not a construction a priori, but a posterior ... Therefore it has to be conscious of its limitations.”<sup>48</sup>

Even more evident becomes Bonhoeffer’s “Barthianism” in his article “The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude toward Philosophy and Science.” Right in the beginning he declares “that I do not see any other possible way for you to get into real contact with his [Barth’s] thinking than by forgetting at least for this hour everything you have learned before concerning

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<sup>44</sup> Hanfried Müller, *Von der Kirche zur Welt. Ein Beitrag zu der Beziehung des Wortes Gottes auf die societas in Dietrich Bonhoeffers theologischer Entwicklung* (Leipzig 1961), 152.

<sup>45</sup> “Die Frage nach dem Menschen in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie und Theologie,” in *DBW* 10, 370–371. Cf. K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 383.

<sup>46</sup> *NRS*, 63 (*DBW* 10, 372).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” in *DBW* 10, 426. An allusion to Barth’s concept of the “word of God” can be seen in the characterization of the “word of God” as “God in his revelation as the Holy Spirit... God remains always and entirely subject” (431).



this problem.”<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the philosophy of religion prevailing in the United States, Barth stands, according to Bonhoeffer, “in the tradition of genuine Christian thinking,” that is in the theological ancestry of Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard.<sup>50</sup> Therefore Barth tries to let “the world of biblical thinking” come alive again and he “finds the Bible full of the testimony of the awkwardness and foolishness of God’s revelation.”<sup>51</sup>

When Bonhoeffer emphasizes that “the revelation of God is executed not in the area of ideas, but in the area of reality,”<sup>52</sup> this statement is corresponding Barth’s intentions, which was to place the reality of revelation into priority over its possibility.<sup>53</sup> Contrary to those scholars, who suggest that Bonhoeffer here is “not in line with Barth’s intentions,”<sup>54</sup> the differences should not be exaggerated. Even in “Fate and Idea in Theology” (1929), usually referred to in order to prove that Bonhoeffer is not in accordance with Barth, the latter seeks to understand “God as reality” and as “real in the eminent sense.”<sup>55</sup> Both, Barth and Bonhoeffer, though using different formulations, seek to secure the concept of God’s reality against being misunderstood as flat “reality” in the sense of the merely factual, and to keep it open for changes.<sup>56</sup>

Bonhoeffer knows well that however much he depends on Barth, he is very much on his own in addressing the problem of the “relation between

<sup>49</sup> The meaning of this statement should not be generalized; rather, it refers to the immediate context of the seminar on the attitude of theology towards philosophy and science only (cf. Reinhard Staats, “Nachwort,” in *DBW* 10, 627).

<sup>50</sup> “The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude Toward Philosophy and Science,” in *DBW* 10, 435.

<sup>51</sup> *DBW* 10, 437–438; cf. “The logic of the Bible” is “God’s coming which destroys all human attempts to come” (438).

<sup>52</sup> *DBW* 10, 436.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (The Christian Dogmatics in Outline [1927]), section 14 (“The Objective Possibility of Revelation”), 306f.: “We did not construct and shall wisely avoid constructing ... The Word, God’s Son, Jesus Christ himself, the reality of revelation, without which we would be in no position to give an account to ourselves about its possibilities.”

<sup>54</sup> Hans Pfeifer, *Das Kirchenverständnis Dietrich Bonhoeffers*. Unpublished dissertation, Heidelberg 1963, 79. Cf. R. Staats, Afterword in *DBW* 10, 626; cf. *DBW* 10, 436, editorial note 9. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 158–159, maintains that Bonhoeffer “suppressed” his critical questions to Barth “so completely that ... his proselyting zeal led him to mingle his own propositions with those of Barth and actually attribute them to him, no doubt without realizing it.”

<sup>55</sup> K. Barth, *Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie* (1929); (“Fate and Idea in Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, edited by H. M. Rumscheidt, translated by G. Hunsinger (Allison Park, PA. 1986), 37: The thought of God, “to be taken seriously ... must be an expression of reality, indeed of the great reality which includes and surpasses all other reality in itself.”

<sup>56</sup> In *DBWE* 2, 115 (*DBW* 2, 112). Bonhoeffer had put it as follows: “There is no God who ‘is there’.”

theology and philosophy with regard to the use of forms of general philosophical thinking in theology,”<sup>57</sup> “since Barth never has published any comprehensive treatment of our problem.”<sup>58</sup> However, the result is that – as Bonhoeffer approvingly cites Barth – “there is no Christian philosophy or philosophical terminology at all.” Thus, Bonhoeffer seems to agree with Barth that “it does not make very much difference what philosophy a theologian has, but everything depends upon how strongly he keeps his eyes on the category of the word of God, on the fact of revelation, of justification by faith.”<sup>59</sup>

### III. First Face-to-Face Encounter with Barth in Bonn

In July 1931 the first face-to-face meeting of Dietrich Bonhoeffer with Karl Barth took place in Bonn.<sup>60</sup> The fact that Bonhoeffer had been regarded as a “Barthian” in New York, although he never had studied with Barth, must have enforced his interest to get to know the head of “dialectical theology” in a way that now a journey to Bonn seemed to become unavoidable. The Swiss theologian Erwin Sutz, with whom he had become friends at Union Theological Seminary, had announced his visit to Barth.<sup>61</sup>

Only a few days after his arrival in Bonn Bonhoeffer wrote to his American friend Paul Lehmann on 10 July 1931, after having visited Barth’s dogmatics lectures for the first time: “this morning at 7 I heard K. Barth for the first time. I could not help thinking all the time very much of you. How much would you have enjoyed this lecture! ... It would be wonderful if you could be here! I am totally alone.”<sup>62</sup> The same evening a discussion “with people from Maria Laach,”<sup>63</sup> namely Benedictines from the famous monastery, took place in Barth’s home. On a postcard Bonhoeffer gave a report to his parents: “I have now met Barth and got to know him quite well at a discussion evening at his house. I like him very much in-

<sup>57</sup> *DBW* 10, 440.

<sup>58</sup> *DBW* 10, 435.

<sup>59</sup> *DBW* 10, 447. The assumption that in this article Bonhoeffer in contrast to Barth meant to highlight the task of a “general philosophical thinking” in the field of theology (Gerhard Krause, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *TRE* 7, 58) is erroneous.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 175ff.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> Letter to Paul Lehmann, 10 July 1931, in *DBW* 17, 90. Cf. also Bonhoeffer’s postcard to E. Sutz (15 July 1931) in *DBW* 11, 16 (*NRS*, 119): “Here I am sitting in the park in front of the University. Barth lectured this morning at seven. I had a short talk with him ... Despite your thorough preparation, there was a great deal in the lecture which surprised me ... I am all alone here and waste the rest of the day quite uselessly.”

<sup>63</sup> *DBW* 11, 16–17.

deed, and am also very much impressed by his lectures. Everything is so well worked out and has not yet become mechanical to him. I think I shall gain a great deal from the time spent here.”<sup>64</sup>

In his lectures of summer 1931 Barth was occupied with the “Prolegomena to Dogmatics,” which would be published as the first part-volume of his *Church Dogmatics* in autumn 1932. In addition to his dogmatics lectures Barth taught a seminar on Schleiermacher’s „Doctrine of Faith,” and in another seminar for advanced students (*Sozietät*) he treated Schleiermacher’s “Short Explanation of Theological Studies.”<sup>65</sup> Bonhoeffer participated also in these seminars. According to a student’s recollection he quoted in one session Luther’s statement “that the curses of the godless sometimes sound better to God’s ear than the hallelujahs of the pious.”<sup>66</sup> This phrase seems to have delighted Barth, so that his interest in the young colleague from Berlin increased.

On 23 July 1931 Bonhoeffer was invited by Barth for lunch and a conversation that lasted several hours. The next day he wrote to Erwin Sutz in order to give him a report. He starts by expressing a certain feeling of uneasiness in the inner circle of Barth’s disciples: “You will well be able to imagine that I have often wished that you were here, particularly so that you could have had a good laugh on a number of occasions with the pundits. I don’t dare do that so much here, only hesitantly . . . , but with my bastard theological derivation I have less occasion, as I notice again quite clearly. They have a sharp scent for thoroughbreds here. No Negro passes ‘for white’; they even examine his fingernails and the soles of his feet. Up till now they have shown me hospitality as unknown stranger.”<sup>67</sup>

Obviously, already at that time, a kind of “school” had formed around Barth, a closed circle of disciples which had a deterring effect on outsiders. One of them, Helmut Gollwitzer, hosted an evening meeting of Barth’s initiates with Bonhoeffer.<sup>68</sup> It seems that Bonhoeffer made a great impres-

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<sup>64</sup> Postcard to the parents (14 July 1931) in *DBW* 11, 15 (cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. E. Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (Munich 1978), 227.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176 (recollection by Winfried Maechler). Bonhoeffer quoted this phrase repeatedly in his writings and lectures; cf. *DBWE* 2, 160 note 31 (*DBW* 2, 160, notes 31 and 67); cf. “Das Wesen der Kirche,” in *DBW* 11, 293, note 377; cf. Ethics *DBWE* 6, 124 (*DBW* 6, 115).

<sup>67</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (24 July 1931) in *NRS*, 120 (*DBW* 11, 18–19); cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176; translation altered.

<sup>68</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (24 July 1931) in *DBW* 11, 21. Cf. Helmut Gollwitzer, “Weg des Gehorsams,” in *Begegnungen mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by W.-D. Zimmermann (Munich, fourth extended edition, 1969), 130. Gollwitzer’s recollection confirms Bonhoeffer’s impression that the “Barthians” looked upon outsiders with a certain arrogance. However, it seems incorrect with respect to Bonhoeffer, who in the days of his visit in

sion on some of these students; at least one of them, Winfried Maechler, decided to continue his studies with Bonhoeffer in Berlin.

In his letter to Sutz Bonhoeffer continues: "Now with Karl Barth himself, of course, everything is completely different. One breathes in an orderly way, one is no longer afraid of dying of suffocation in the thin air. I don't think that I have ever regretted anything that I have failed to do in my theological past as much as the fact that I did not come here earlier. Now there are only three weeks for me to be here, lectures ..., seminars, meetings, an open evening and now yesterday a couple of hours at lunch with Barth. One hears and sees something there ... But it is important and surprising in the best way to see how Barth stands over and beyond his books. There is with him an openness, a readiness for any objection which should hit the mark, and along with this such concentration and impetuous insistence on the point, whether it is made arrogantly or modestly, dogmatically or completely uncertainly, and not only when it serves his own theology. I am coming to understand more and more why Barth's writings are so tremendously difficult to understand. I have been impressed even more by discussions with him than by his writings and his lectures. For he is really there. I have never seen anything like it before and wouldn't have believed it possible."<sup>69</sup>

Bonhoeffer's enthusiasm regarding Barth is well recognizable in these lines. His admiration does not diminish the fact that he had some critical questions to ask and that Barth's answers for the time being did not completely satisfy him. Bonhoeffer was mainly interested in "the ethical problem."<sup>70</sup> Barth, as Bonhoeffer reports to Sutz, "would not make concessions to me where I expected that he would have to. Beside the one great light in the night, he said, there were also many little lights, so-called 'relative ethical criteria;' he could not, however, make their significance and application and nature comprehensible to me – we didn't get beyond a simple reference to the Bible." When Barth finally remarked that his guest "turned grace into a principle and thereby killed everything else," Bonhoeffer rejects the suspicion of going-on about principles; on the other hand he cannot understand "why everything else should *not* be killed."<sup>71</sup> It is remark-

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Bonn certainly was not yet regarded as a "new theological light" by his students, because he started his theological teaching at the university of Berlin only after his return from Bonn in October 1931 with the lecture on "The History of Systematic Theology in the Twentieth Century."

<sup>69</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (24 July 1931), in *NRS*, 120–121 (*DBW* 11, 19). Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 176.

<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer was well prepared for the conversation, because he had already studied the transcripts of Barth's Münster "Ethics" lectures (winter 1928/29), which were circulated by the World Student Christian Federation (cf. D. Braun, "Vorwort," in: K. Barth, *Ethik II*, edited by Dietrich Braun (Zurich, 1978), IX.

<sup>71</sup> *NRS*, 121 (*DBW* 11, 20).

able in this report that it is just Bonhoeffer, who in a christomonistic way rejects “relative ethical criteria,” whereas Barth cultivates a perspective more flexible, an early version of his “doctrine of lights.”<sup>72</sup>

Bonhoeffer sums up his impression from the personal meeting with Barth: “There is really someone from whom one take away much; yet I sit in the impoverished Berlin and complain because no one is there who can teach theology and in addition other useful things.”<sup>73</sup> Some weeks later Bonhoeffer recalls those days in Bonn in a letter to Paul Lehmann: “The time at Bonn was marvellous not only from the theological point of view but also or perhaps even more by the fact that I got to know Barth personally. He is really a theologian at home as well as in the classroom. ... When you see Barth you know at once – even if [you] come entirely from outside – that there is something worthwhile to risk your life for.”<sup>74</sup> And at Christmas 1931, in another letter to Sutz, Bonhoeffer contrasts his feeling of theological isolation in Berlin with his recollection of the meeting with Barth in Bonn: “Since my return from Bonn, things here seem to be worse than ever.”<sup>75</sup>

#### IV. Lectures at the University of Berlin

It is not by chance that the first course taught by Bonhoeffer in the winter semester of 1931–1932 on “The History of Systematic Theology in the Twentieth Century” culminates in a section entitled “The Word of God and Theology,” containing a detailed presentation of the theological “revolution” brought about by Barth. Bonhoeffer describes Barth’s position underlining that “the subject of theology” is “solely the *logos theou*,” the Word of God. “Human beings can no longer go behind this beginning.”<sup>76</sup> Barth’s theology is, according to Bonhoeffer, “a theology which once again wants to understand wholly the *sola fide*, and for that reason speaks on the grounds of predestination and, hence, dialectically ... There is nothing in all of recent literature that seriously poses a challenge to Barth.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Concerning Barth’s doctrine of “true words” outside the church – often referred to in the simplified term “doctrine of lights,” cf. *KD IV/3, First Part* (Zurich 1959), 3ff.

<sup>73</sup> *DBW* 11, 20–21.

<sup>74</sup> Letter to P. Lehmann (23 August 1931) in *DBW* 17, 92–93. Cf. also Bonhoeffer’s recollection in his letter to E. Sutz (8 October 1931) that he “would immediately return to Bonn. Those days were truly an extraordinary time” (*DBW* 11, 28).

<sup>75</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (25 December 1931) in *NRS*, 140 (*DBW* 11, 50–51).

<sup>76</sup> “Die Geschichte der systematischen Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *DBW* 11, 199.

<sup>77</sup> *DBW* 11, 211.

But Bonhoeffer does want to challenge Barth. Once again he repeats his critique of Barth's understanding of God's freedom. "The understanding of the *sola fide* calls for the radical concept of God's freedom. Barth's term 'in each instance.' ... In contrast the Lutheran: (it is) God's freedom and honor to have bound Godself wholly to the Word. Not freedom from but freedom for ... The community lives of this in freely given continuity which is Christ himself present."<sup>78</sup> In this context Bonhoeffer again mentions "the ethical problem." Barth's understanding of ethics as "demonstration" excludes "an ethics of principles," and Bonhoeffer agrees; however, the same conception prevents "every concrete" ethics. How then is it possible to develop a Christian ethics "as a scholarly discipline?"<sup>79</sup> Bonhoeffer is concerned with God's visible coming and with a corresponding preaching of the Law as "concrete commandment." He tries to resolve his critical questions in a recollection of the unresolved issues of the religious-socialist first edition of Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919) which the famous revised second edition had not settled. At the center of the first edition was "God's visible approach to the world," while the "second edition" emphasized the God who comes ever anew to the world "in each distinct instance."<sup>80</sup> In those months of 1931–1932 Bonhoeffer aligned himself with Barth in the "Günter Dehn case," defending the defamed "religious socialist" against attacks by Nazi students.

In his lectures on "The Nature of the Church" in the summer of 1932 Bonhoeffer referred to some recently published essays by Barth on ecclesiology.<sup>81</sup> In his seminar entitled "Is There a Christian Ethics?" Bonhoeffer sought further clarification of the ethical issue. He is interested in the "connection" between the "self-acting and working" will of God and the "action of human beings."<sup>82</sup> Following the approach of "dialectical theo-

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<sup>78</sup> *DBW* 11, 211.

<sup>79</sup> *DBW* 11, 212–213.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *DBW* 11, 209. The editors of *DBW* 11 assume (cf. note 300) that the reference here is to the difference between Barth's *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932) and his earlier *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (1927). However, this is impossible, because Bonhoeffer finished his lecture on 2 February 1932, whereas the foreword to *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, volume I/1 dates from August 1932. Bonhoeffer could not have used this volume for his lecture.

<sup>81</sup> "Das Wesen der Kirche," in *DBW* 11, 245. Cf. K. Barth, "Der Begriff der Kirche," in *Zwischen den Zeiten* 5 (1927), 365–378; "Quousque tandem ...?," in *Zwischen den Zeiten* 8 (1930), 1–6; "Die Not der evangelischen Kirche," in *Zwischen den Zeiten* 9 (1931), 89–122.

<sup>82</sup> "Gibt es eine christliche Ethik?," in *DBW* 11, 305. Here Bonhoeffer refers to Barth's exposition of Romans 13 and 14 in *The Epistle to the Romans* (second edition, 1922); "Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart," in *Zwischen den Zeiten* 1 (1923), 30–57; "Der heilige Geist und das christliche Leben," in Beiheft 1, *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Munich 1930), 39–105.

logy” he asks if there is something like an “ethics of revelation.”<sup>83</sup> Bonhoeffer searches for an answer in “the concept of sacrament” which he wants to “draw into” the discussion of ethics.<sup>84</sup> “The gospel becomes concrete through the sacrament, the commandment through reality.”<sup>85</sup> An “ethics of revelation,” in contrast to the conservative Lutheran concept of “orders of creation,” can speak of “*orders of preservation*” only as these are oriented “toward Christ.”<sup>86</sup> In his lectures on “Recent Publications in Systematic Theology,” delivered in the winter of 1932–1933, Bonhoeffer treated among others Barth’s book on Anselm, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931).<sup>87</sup> Bonhoeffer had already praised that book in his Christmas Letter of 1931 to Sutz.<sup>88</sup> Now Bonhoeffer agrees with Barth that “theology is a thinking that is bound to the church as the place of revelation. ... Its object is the creed, spoken and affirmed beforehand. That is why theology is possible only within the domain of the church.”<sup>89</sup>

Only one of Bonhoeffer’s lectures at the university of Berlin was prepared by himself for publication, “Creation and Sin. Theological Exposition of Gen 1–3” (winter semester of 1932–1933), published as *Creation and Fall* (1933). Much later this publication became relevant within the first part-volume of Barth’s *Doctrine of Creation* (1945), where he explicitly refers to Bonhoeffer’s concept of *analogia relationis* (analogy in relationship) and makes it his own.<sup>90</sup> Bonhoeffer’s exposition of Gen 1,26f.,

<sup>83</sup> “Gibt es eine christliche Ethik?,” in *DBW* 11, 308, note 20.

<sup>84</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (17 May 1932) in *DBW* 11, 89. After a meeting with Barth in Berlin on occasion of Barth’s lecture on “Theology and Mission in the Present” (11 April 1932) Bonhoeffer was convinced that in the matter of ethics as God’s concrete commandment Barth did not side with him. However, Barth had admitted that “this point was still uncannily troublesome for him.”

<sup>85</sup> “Gibt es eine christliche Ethik?,” in *DBW* 11, 311, note 42.

<sup>86</sup> *DBW* 11, 312.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme*, translated by Ian W. Robertson (Allison Park, PA, 1931).

<sup>88</sup> Letter to E. Sutz (25 December 1931) in *NRS*, 140–141 (*DBW* 11, 50–51): “Barth’s book on Anselm is a great delight to me; you must read it when you have time. He shows the countless academic cripples, once and for all, that he really does know how better to interpret and still remain sovereign.” However, Bonhoeffer continues: “Nothing of course has in fact become less questionable” (translation slightly altered).

<sup>89</sup> “Besprechung und Diskussion systematisch-theologischer Neuerscheinungen,” in *DBW* 12, 160–161.

<sup>90</sup> K. Barth, *KD* III/1 (“Die Lehre von der Schöpfung”), (Zurich 1945), 218–219, here *CD* III/1, 194–195: “Dietrich Bonhoeffer ... offers us important help in this respect ... As God is free for man, so man is free for man; but only inasmuch as God is for him, so that the *analogia relationis* as the meaning of the divine likeness cannot be equated with an *analogia entis*.” Cf. *DBWE* 3, 65 (*DBW* 3, 61): “The likeness, the analogia, of humankind to God is not *analogia entis* but *analogia relationis*.”

according to which the analogy of humanity's life "in the image of God" is concretized in the duality of and in the "relationship" between "male and female,"<sup>91</sup> is extensively worked out by Barth in his "anthropology" in the second part-volume of his *Doctrine of Creation* (1948).<sup>92</sup>

Bethge remarks that in the years at the eve of the rise of National Socialism Bonhoeffer did not receive, "in the form he had desired," "Barth's support in his concern for the concrete ethical commandments."<sup>93</sup> However, after having visited Barth on the 'Bergli' (a cottage in Switzerland, where Barth spent many of his holidays), Bonhoeffer wrote Barth on Christmas Eve 1932 that he had "a peculiarly sure feeling that the way you see things is somehow right ... that somehow the point of it all is being touched on."<sup>94</sup> In February 1933 Barth thanked Bonhoeffer for the Christmas letter and also for his review on Karl Heim's book *Glauben und Denken*, where Heim had attacked Barth.<sup>95</sup> In his review Bonhoeffer had written that Heim's charge against Barth – that he lacks concreteness – turns "directly back on himself." For if Barth is in danger of "making God an object of thought," then Bonhoeffer is convinced that this is the crux of every theology. "The idiosyncratic feature" of Barth's theology is his belief "that he cannot secure himself against this danger while constantly keeping an eye on this danger."<sup>96</sup> In his letter of thanks Barth describes his feeling of theological isolation. "Over the past months I have begun to feel more and more strongly that a great many of the theological alliances claimed to have been seen in Germany in recent years have been deceptive." It seemed to Barth as if he had been "thrown back into the same solitude" from which he "rode into this peculiar arena twelve years ago." And he thanks Bonhoeffer that he had made a stance for him at the faculty of theology in Berlin.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 3, 64 (*DBW* 3, 60): "How is the creature free? The creature is free in that one creature exists in relation to another creature, in that one human being is free for another human being. God created them man and woman. The human being is not alone. Human beings exist in duality, and it is in this *dependence on the other that their creatureliness consists*" (emphasis in original).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *KD* III/2 (Zurich 1948), 262f., 390f.

<sup>93</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 178. This does not prevent Bonhoeffer from recommending Paul Lehmann to go to Bonn for a year of study in order to get to know Barth's approach to the "discussion of ethical problems" (cf. Bonhoeffer's letter to P. Lehmann (30 May 1932) in *DBW* 17, 107).

<sup>94</sup> Letter to K. Barth (24 December 1932) in *DBW* 12, 37.

<sup>95</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Bonhoeffer (4 February 1933) in *NRS*, 201–202 (*DBW* 12, 48).

<sup>96</sup> "Zu Karl Heims Glaube und Denken," in *DBW* 12, 228.

<sup>97</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Bonhoeffer (4 February 1933) in *NRS*, 201 (*DBW* 12, 48–49). Bonhoeffer had openly sided with Barth in the winter of 1932–1933 and campaigned – in vain – that he be called to the university of Berlin.



### V. The "Aryan Clause" as *Status Confessionis*

After the Nazi rise to power, when the Protestant Church of Prussia aligned itself with the new legislation and the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi state, Bonhoeffer tried to settle every theological difference between himself and Barth seeking at the same time the support of the latter. In his "Christology" lectures (summer 1933) he qualified his earlier criticism of Barth. Whereas according to *Act and Being* (1930) "the old *extra calvinisticum*" had been "in error,"<sup>98</sup> Bonhoeffer now speaks of the Lutheran "capax" in terms of what sounds like a Reformed proviso: "Finitum capax infiniti, non per se, sed per infinitum" [The finite can hold the infinite, not by itself, but it can by the aid of the infinite].<sup>99</sup> Barth could have put the matter that way.<sup>100</sup>

Bonhoeffer believed himself to be following entirely the directions Barth had signalled in his pamphlet *Theological Existence Today!* (25 June 1933), when he wrote Barth in September 1933, after the "brown" synod of the Prussian Church had adopted the "Aryan Clause" excluding church members of Jewish descent from ministry and other official positions: "In your booklet you said that where a Christian church adopted the Aryan Clause it would cease to be a Christian church ... Now the expected has happened." According to Bonhoeffer "there can be no doubt at all that the *status confessionis* has arrived." Therefore the question that concerns him above all is what this ecclesiological perception will mean concretely in terms of church politics. "What we are by no means clear about," he writes, "is how the confession is most appropriately expressed today." Bonhoeffer mentions that "several of us are now very drawn to the idea of the Free Church," and he adds: "I know that many people now wait on your judgment; I also know that most of them are of the opinion that you will counsel us to wait until we are thrown out."<sup>101</sup>

Barth promptly replied from the "Bergli." He agrees: "Naturally the decision of the General Synod has at least partly realised the possibility which I considered. They do not, or apparently do not yet, want to go as far as excluding non-Aryans from church-membership. But even the decree about officials and pastors is intolerable." And he concurs: "I too am of the

<sup>98</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 134.

<sup>99</sup> "Christologie," in *DBW* 12, 332.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (Edinburgh 1975), 406–407.

<sup>101</sup> Letter to K. Barth (9 September 1933) in *NRS*, 226–227 (*DBW* 12, 124); translation altered. Against the majority of the pastors of the oppositional "Young Reformers Movement" in Berlin, Bonhoeffer and his friend Franz Hildebrandt, who himself was a victim of the Aryan clause, insisted "that to effect an immediate exodus would not only be more theologically consistent but more strategically successful than a delay" (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 308).

opinion that there is a *status confessionis*.” Regarding the question when there is a possibility of leaving the church, however, Barth’s answer was as “most of them” had expected: “Otherwise I am for waiting. When the schism comes, it must come from the other side ... It could then well be that the collision might take place at a still more central point ... Perhaps in that case it may not be absolutely necessary to be willing to wait until one is expelled or dismissed. Perhaps one will then really have to ‘walk out.’ But that should only be a last resort for us ... We will in no way need to regret at a later date an extremely active, polemical waiting.”<sup>102</sup>

Bethge suggests that Bonhoeffer’s “going off to England”<sup>103</sup> in fall 1933 was at least in part a reaction to his disappointment with Barth’s answer.<sup>104</sup>

In his letter to Barth from London (24 October 1933) Bonhoeffer writes that, after the adoption of the “Aryan Clause” in the Prussian Church, he knew that he “could not accept the pastorate for which I had been longing, particularly in that part of the city, if I was unwilling to give up my unconditional opposition to *this* church ... It would have meant abandoning my solidarity with the Jewish Christian pastors.” Then he confesses to Barth: “I even feel as though, by going away, I have been personally disloyal to you”<sup>105</sup> by having made the decision to accept the call to two German congregations in London without obtaining Barth’s advice in advance.

Bonhoeffer’s feelings of uneasiness were not without reason, as is demonstrated by Barth’s response: “You were quite right not to seek any wisdom from me before doing it. I would have advised against it, unconditionally and certainly bringing up the heaviest artillery ... No, to all the reasons and apologies that you may still have to offer, I can only and shall always have the same answer: And what of the German church? And what of the German church? – until you are back in Berlin, manning your abandoned machine gun like a loyal soldier. Haven’t you seen yet that we have entered a time of altogether *undialectical* theology?” He urged Bonhoeffer to return to his post “by the next ship! Well, let’s say, with the one after that.”<sup>106</sup> And Bonhoeffer did return, but only in April 1935, nearly one year after the Confessing Church had been founded in Barmen (May 1934).

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<sup>102</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Bonhoeffer (11 September 1933) in *NRS*, 232–233 (*DBW* 12, 126–127).

<sup>103</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Bonhoeffer (20 November 1933) in *DBWE* 13, 39 (*DBW* 13, 31).

<sup>104</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 309.

<sup>105</sup> Letter to K. Barth, London (24 October 1933) in *DBWE* 13, 23–24 (*DBW* 13, 12–14).

<sup>106</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Bonhoeffer (20 November 1933) in *DBWE* 13, 39–40 (*DBW* 13, 32–33).

## VI. An "Ongoing, Silent Discussion"

Bonhoeffer's return to Germany in April 1935, in order to serve as director of a new Preachers' Seminary of the Confessing Church, must not blind us to the fact that his theological position differed from the understanding of many other protagonists in the German "church struggle." Regarding the relationship with Barth it can be said that "to some extent, the church struggle strengthened [their] alliance ... against secessionists and renegades. Nonetheless, during this ... period of their relationship it was not only the geographical distance between them that increased."<sup>107</sup> Shortly after Bonhoeffer's return Barth himself was driven out of Nazi Germany, after he had been forced to retire from his leading position in the Confessing Church and from his teaching position in Bonn.<sup>108</sup> Moreover "the Sermon on the Mount had moved into the foreground" of Bonhoeffer's thought, and in this respect "he did not yet find anything helpful in Barth."<sup>109</sup>

Bonhoeffer's turn to the Sermon on the Mount had already taken place in London. Writing to Sutz in April 1934 he says: "While I am working with the church opposition with all my might, it's perfectly clear to me that *this* opposition is only a temporary transitional phase on the way to an opposition of a very different kind ... You know, it is my belief – perhaps it will amaze you – that it is the *Sermon on the Mount* that has the deciding word on this whole affair. I think Barth's theology ... [has] delayed recognition of this a little while, but [has] certainly also made it possible."<sup>110</sup> Then he concludes: "*Following* Christ – what that really is, I'd like to know – it is not exhausted by our concept of faith." In this context Bonhoeffer mentions that he is "doing some writing that I think of as a 'spiritual exercise' – only as a first step."<sup>111</sup>

The rediscovery of the Sermon on the Mount constitutes the point of departure for Bonhoeffer's church struggle; it is from here that he decides to return to Germany. At the time when the Confessing Church declined more and more, Bonhoeffer tried to bring together in the "house of broth-

<sup>107</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 185.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Hans Prolingheuer, *Der Fall Karl Barth 1934–1935. Chronographie einer Vertreibung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, second edition, 1984).

<sup>109</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 185.

<sup>110</sup> Letter to E. Sutz, London (28 April 1934) in *DBWE* 13, 135 (*DBW* 13, 128–129). Bonhoeffer wants to know how Sutz preaches on the Sermon on the Mount. "I am currently trying to preach on it, very simply, without pretension. And I speak always for keeping the commandment and against evading it" (translation altered).

<sup>111</sup> *DBWE* 13, 136 (*DBW* 13, 129). The reference to "exercises" is Bonhoeffer's first reference to what he was later to present to the seminarians at Finkenwalde under the title *Discipleship*.

ers” Finkenwalde seminarians who would be prepared to try out “a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>112</sup> Bethge comments that “for Bonhoeffer, Barth’s answers to his questions at this stage did not take him far enough. He provided his own answer in *Discipleship*, but only after his death did Barth express the agreement and approval that Bonhoeffer had longed for.”<sup>113</sup>

And so it was that, while working on his book *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer was looking for other theological teachers; Søren Kierkegaard’s discovery of the “individual” in particular seemed to be of help to him. In an undated letter from 1934 concerning the development of the church struggle, he expresses his belief that there will be a second, real battle, when “we shall rediscover ourselves as individuals, and through individual witness – and only so – shall we rediscover what discipleship means.”<sup>114</sup> In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer devotes a whole chapter to “the individual,” and in the section on the discipleship faith of Abraham he makes use of the interpretation of Kierkegaard that he had criticized in *Sanctorum Communio*,<sup>115</sup> where he had shown his critical assessment of the use Barth had made of Kierkegaard’s “individualism” in his commentary of *The Epistle to the Romans* (second, revised edition of 1922).<sup>116</sup> It seems that Bonhoeffer discovered Kierkegaard’s “individual” for himself at the time Barth was turning his back on the Danish prophet of “existentialism.”<sup>117</sup>

It was not until September 1936, when the work for the book *Discipleship* was nearly completed, that Bonhoeffer again wrote Barth: “The whole period was basically an ongoing, silent discussion with you, and so I had to keep silent for a while. The chief questions are those of the exposition of the Sermon on the Mount and the Pauline doctrine of justification and

<sup>112</sup> Letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, London (14 January 1935) in *DBWE* 13, 285 (*DBW* 13, 273).

<sup>113</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 186.

<sup>114</sup> *DBWE* 13, 190 (*DBW* 13, 177). Concerning Bonhoeffer’s engagement with Kierkegaard cf. A. Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 53–56 and Geoffrey Kelly’s essay above.

<sup>115</sup> *DBWE* 4, 94–95 (*DBW* 4, 89–90); cf. the references to Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* in *DBWE* 1, 162 (*DBW* 1, 104).

<sup>116</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 1, 170, note 28 (*DBW* 1, 111, note 28).

<sup>117</sup> Cf. K. Barth, “A Thank-You and a Bow: Kierkegaard’s Reveille,” in *K. Barth, Fragments Grave and Gay*, edited by H. Martin Rumscheidt (London 1971), 98: “The second edition of my *Epistle to the Romans* is the very telling document of my participation in what has been called ‘the Kierkegaard Renaissance’ ... It is true, however ... that in my later books, writings, and sermons, express references to Kierkegaard have become fewer and fewer.” Cf. also Barth’s foreword to his *Church Dogmatics* (Munich 1932), where he writes that compared with his earlier *Christian Dogmatics in Outline* he has cancelled everything which could be perceived as a foundation of theology in existentialism (*KD* I/1, VIII).

sanctification. I am engaged in a work on the subject and would have asked and learnt a very, very great deal from you.” Even if Bonhoeffer is clearly aware that in relation to Barth and Reformation theology he is moving on new paths with his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, he wants to make explicit that his independent thinking not be misunderstood as a separation from Barth. Even though he is “not counted as one of the theologians associated with you,”<sup>118</sup> he himself knows well “that it is not true.” And usually, “most of us who feel that they had to keep away from you for a while ... seem to find that afterwards, in a personal conversation with you, they learn that once again they have seen the whole question in far too crude terms.” Concerning the “communal life” in the Preacher’s Seminary with its combination of “theological work” and “spiritual community,” rooted in “morning and evening gathering around the word” and in “fixed times for prayer,” Bonhoeffer mentions explicitly that he perceives it to be “only the consequence of what you have made very clear in ‘Anselm.’ The charge of legalism does not seem to me to fit at all.”<sup>119</sup>

Obviously, Bonhoeffer knew of the mistrust on the side of Barth regarding the attempt at realizing a kind of “evangelical monastery” in Finkenwalde.<sup>120</sup> Even though Barth’s book on Anselm encouraged Bonhoeffer’s experiment it could not reduce Barth’s suspicions concerning the “theoretical-practical system” he saw taking shape in Finkenwalde. Barth does tell Bonhoeffer, however, that he has “much sympathy with that” and does not think it to be an “impossible” undertaking in principle. But what troubles him about an “Introduction to Daily Meditation” from Finkenwalde, composed by Eberhard Bethge,<sup>121</sup> is the “odour of monastic eros and pathos” for which “at the moment I still have neither a positive feeling nor a use for it.” In addition, he preferred not to “go with the distinction in principle between theological work and devotional edification.” He “looked forward openly, but not without concern,” to the attempt in the new book to raise in a new way “the inexhaustible theme of justification and sanctification.” He considered it a mistake to resign „in the face of the original Christological-eschatological beginning in favour of some kind of realisa-

<sup>118</sup> To his disappointment Bonhoeffer had not been invited to contribute to the Festschrift for Barth’s fiftieth birthday in 1936.

<sup>119</sup> Letter to Karl Barth (19 September 1936) in *DBW* 14, 235–237.

<sup>120</sup> There had been an indirect contact between Barth and Bonhoeffer in August 1935, when Bonhoeffer’s assistant Wilhelm Rott, “a Barthian influenced by the Reformed tradition of the Rhineland” (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 424) had visited Barth in Switzerland. On 21 August 1935 Barth’s assistant Charlotte von Kirschbaum noted on this occasion about Rott’s report from Finkenwalde: “In the afternoon Mr. Wilh. Rott – former student – here, reports about attempts at reform with monastic tendency in Finkenwalde under Bonhoeffer. Karl warns. It seems to be an escape movement. The real question there is the issue of objection to military service” (in: *DBW* 14, 250, note 3).

<sup>121</sup> “Anleitung zur täglichen Meditation,” in *DBW* 14, 945–950.

tion (in fact becoming more and more abstract) in a specifically human sphere." Nevertheless, Barth did not wish his questions to be understood "as a criticism of your efforts, simply because the basis of my knowledge and understanding of them is still far too scanty."<sup>122</sup>

We may leave open the question as to what extent Bonhoeffer's book *Discipleship* and especially the project of the "Brothers' House" contained features of resignation.<sup>123</sup> In a letter to Sutz Bonhoeffer complains that his real concern is being misunderstood when Barth detects in it an extension of the contemporary "groups movement." That movement was indeed taking on "an extremely serious appearance" in Germany so that suspicion was quite appropriate. But Bonhoeffer insists that his Finkenwalde experiment ought not be aligned with such an "apolitical, living phenomenon" and its sanctimonious retreat to the backwoods of religion.<sup>124</sup> What he wants to accomplish is not at all a softening of the confrontation by means of withdrawal into the pious group but, on the contrary, a strengthening of the Confessing Church's intransigent position on the basis of the decisions reached at the Synods of Barmen and Dahlem. He made that clear in his essay on "The Boundaries of the Church and Church Union" (April 1936).<sup>125</sup> Reporting to Barth about the conflicts around the publication, he writes: "Unfortunately I am at the moment involved in a big battle over my article on church union. People are getting frightfully excited about it. And I thought that I was writing something obvious. I would be very glad to have a word from you on the matter."<sup>126</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer's "Comments and Concerns" may to some extent be taken as Barth's "word" on the matter.<sup>127</sup> He called attention to Bonhoeffer's hotly disputed sentence, "Those who knowingly cut themselves off from the Confessing Church in Germany cut themselves off from salvation."<sup>128</sup> Gollwitzer asserted that this sentence could indeed not be interpreted as something "legalistic," but that it was an actualization of what the church had declared from the beginning:

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<sup>122</sup> K. Barth, Letter to D. Bonhoeffer (14 October 1936) in *DBW* 14, 250–253. When in the second part-volume of the "Doctrine of Reconciliation" Barth reached the chapter on "Sanctification" he expressed his unconcealed admiration for Bonhoeffer's book as "by far the best that has been written" on the topic. He even felt "tempted" to insert the first chapters of *Discipleship* as "an extended quotation" into the chapter entitled "The Sanctification of the Human Being;" cf. K. Barth, CD IV/2, 533–534 (KD IV/2, 604).

<sup>123</sup> On the fraternal community of the "Brothers' House" in Finkenwalde, cf. *Life Together* (*DBW/E* 5).

<sup>124</sup> Letter to Erwin Sutz (24 October 1936) in: *DBW* 14, 256.

<sup>125</sup> "Zur Frage nach der Kirchengemeinschaft," in *DBW* 14, 655–680.

<sup>126</sup> Letter to Karl Barth (19 September 1936) in *DBW* 14, 238.

<sup>127</sup> Gollwitzer was at that time writing his dissertation on the early Lutheran doctrine of the Holy Supper in its controversy with Calvinism under the supervision of Karl Barth.

<sup>128</sup> "The Question of the Boundaries of the Church and Church Union," in *WF* 93–94; translation altered.

*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* [outside the church, there is no salvation].”<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, there are formulations in Bonhoeffer’s essay about which doubts may be raised.<sup>130</sup> This goes especially for the assertion that „we can no longer go back behind Barmen and Dahlem ... because we can no longer go back behind the Word of God.”<sup>131</sup> Gollwitzer counters that “the Confession of the church is not the Word of God but the church’s testimony of the Word of God. It is not God, but the church which has spoken at Barmen and at Dahlem, however great the part played by God may be thought to have been.”

No matter, Bonhoeffer believes himself to be wholly with Barth, the author of the Barmen Declaration, when he writes that “since Barmen, Lutherans and Reformed have been speaking with one voice in Synodal declarations. Schismatic differences of confession no longer make it impossible to form a Confessing Synod.”<sup>132</sup> And that is why Bonhoeffer can turn to Barth and ask precisely of him to bring out into the open and to discuss “some of the questions of substance which divide Lutherans and Reformed.”<sup>133</sup>

#### VII. Renewed Proximity: *Ethics and Bonhoeffer’s Journeys to Switzerland*

Since 1938 Barth in his publications repeatedly called for political resistance against Hitler, including “tyrannicide” and military activities.<sup>134</sup> That call earned him disavowal in the ranks of the Confessing Church, but Bonhoeffer took no part in the widespread abandonment of Barth at this time; rather, by his entry into the activities of the political underground, he gave practical expression to Barth’s call. In a letter to his brother-in-law, lawyer Gerhard Leibholz, who had emigrated from Germany and was living in Oxford, Bonhoeffer appears to comment on Barth’s essay on *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (1938): “Karl has now made the attempt, based on the rig-

<sup>129</sup> H. Gollwitzer, “Comments and Concerns,” in *WF*, 97–98.

<sup>130</sup> H. Gollwitzer, *WF*, 99.

<sup>131</sup> “The Question of the Boundaries,” in *WF*, 87.

<sup>132</sup> “The Question of the Boundaries,” in *WF*, 89.

<sup>133</sup> Letter to Karl Barth (19 September 1936) in *DBW* 14, 238 (cf. *WF*, 118).

<sup>134</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God, according to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560*, translated by J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson (London 1938). Cf. also K. Barth, “Rechtfertigung und Recht” (1938); English translation: “Church and State” (1939), in K. Barth, *Community, State and Church. Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA. 1968); cf. also K. Barth, “Open Letter to Josef L. Hromádka” [on occasion of the Munich treaty of September 1938], 19 September 1938, in *Eine Schweizer Stimme 1938-1945* (Zurich, second edition, 1948), 58–59.

orously Reformed thesis, nevertheless to avoid relativizing the historical. That is very tempting. (In good biblical fashion) he relates every order of the created world strictly to Christ and says that they can be properly understood only in relation to him and that they need to find their orientation from him. One simply must read this. Once these problems have been dealt with, the question of the relationship of law, justice and love (in the sense of the Sermon on the Mount) has to be raised, in my judgment ... Law that is oriented toward justice and becomes a historical reality through the use of force (rather than remaining an abstract idea!) is 'a tutor to conduct us to Christ,' as Gal 3:24 puts it."<sup>135</sup> While affirming Barth's "rigorously Reformed" attempt, Bonhoeffer apparently pushes forward independently, his specific concern being the integration of the Sermon on the Mount into Barth's approach.<sup>136</sup>

One may interpret Bonhoeffer's drafts for an *Ethics* as attempts to concretize Barth precisely in relation to the "political worship of God"<sup>137</sup> with the necessary completeness.<sup>138</sup> Obviously, the chapter entitled "The Ultimate and the Penultimate Things" in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, on which he was working during the winter of 1940–1941 in Ettal, was influenced by Barth's essay on *Rechtfertigung* ("justification," as the ultimate) and *Recht* ("justice" or "law," as the penultimate thing).<sup>139</sup> This would be especially true in relation to the coordination of the ultimate and the penultimate depicted in the section of that chapter on "preparing the way for the word."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Letter to Gerhard Leibholz (7 March 1940) in *DBW*, 15, 298–299. Cf. K. Barth, "Church and State," 101: "Is there a connection between justification of the sinner through faith alone, completed once and for all by God through Jesus Christ, and the problem of justice, the problem of human law?"

<sup>136</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr recalled some years later that, during a conversation in London in 1939, Bonhoeffer asserted "that Barth was right in becoming more political." However, he held that "a little pamphlet" was, in this respect, too little in comparison to the size of Barth's dogmatics (cf. E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 621).

<sup>137</sup> Cf. K. Barth, "Church and State," 101: "Is there something like a political service of God?" (translation altered).

<sup>138</sup> Later Bonhoeffer regarded his *Ethics* as "his actual life work" (cf. Letter to E. Bethge (15 December 1943) in *LPP*, 163 (*DBW* 8, 237)).

<sup>139</sup> Bonhoeffer's distinction of "ultimate" and "penultimate" and particularly the understanding of the "ultimate" as "a complete break with everything penultimate, with all that has gone before" (*DBWE* 6, 149) may well go back to the early Barth, who in his Tambach address (1919) had firmly maintained that "the ultimate, the eschaton, the synthesis, is not at all the continuation, the result, the consequence, the next step after the penultimate, but, on the contrary, is the radical break with everything penultimate" (K. Barth, "The Christian's Place in Society," in: K. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 324; translation altered).

<sup>140</sup> *DBWE* 6, 161 (*DBW* 6,153). Cf. K. Barth, "Church and State," 119, according to which the task of the state, in Christological perspective, is to "administer justice and



On the one hand, Bonhoeffer speaks of “the ultimate” as “a complete break with the penultimate.”<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, his chief concern is the “relation” of the “penultimate things ... to the ultimate,” the “preparation” of the way for the ultimate in the penultimate.<sup>142</sup>

It was in the years of the war only that Bonhoeffer met again with Karl Barth face-to-face. In the course of three journeys to Switzerland in charge of the group of conspirators under the cover of the military’s intelligence section he had the opportunity to visit Barth. In his letters Bonhoeffer repeatedly thanks Barth for the “conversations,” but only little of these discussions has been recorded, because they had to confine themselves to oral exchanges. However, it seems possible to reconstruct the main topics with some clarity.

During his first Swiss journey (24 February–24 March 1941) Bonhoeffer was able to obtain the latest volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (“The Doctrine of God”), published in 1940.<sup>143</sup> Before having the volume sent to Berlin, he removed the binding and title page as a matter of precaution. In a letter, written after his return to Germany, Bonhoeffer tells Barth what great joy it was for him to take possession of that volume: “I am well into it by now and am pleased every day to be reading real theology again.” At that time Bonhoeffer himself was working on his *Ethics* every free day available to him. However, as he reported to Barth in his letter: “Along with several others I have now also received a ban on doing any writing for publication.” Then he announces a further journey to Switzerland, for the late summer of 1941, hoping to read and write during that visit: “Much encouraged by my trip, I have recently been making excellent progress in my work. Yet it is often difficult to concentrate, and soon I would very much like to be able to discuss with you, at some length, certain questions concerning my work.”<sup>144</sup>

It seems that during the second journey to Switzerland (29 August to 26 September 1941) it was primarily ethical questions that Bonhoeffer raised in the “conversations” with Barth. At the same time, Barth was also occupied with problems of ethics; in the summer of 1941 he was composing along with the doctrine of “Israel and the Church” the ethical chapter of his “Doctrine of God”.<sup>145</sup> On the basis of a communication by Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Bethge concludes that “Bonhoeffer was now concerned ...

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protect law” and, “in so doing,” grant “the gospel of justification a free and assured course.”

<sup>141</sup> *DBWE* 6, 151 (*DBW* 6, 142).

<sup>142</sup> *DBWE* 6, 151 and 161 (*DBW* 6, 142 and 153).

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Letter to Charlotte von Kirschbaum (19 March 1941) in *DBWE* 16, 174 (*DBW* 16, 164).

<sup>144</sup> Letter to K. Barth (30 May 1941) in *DBWE* 16, 190–191 (*DBW* 16, 182).

<sup>145</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *CD* II/2 (*KD* II/2), chapter 8: “God’s Commandment.”

with the way Christians are drawn into contemporary history. In addition it was questions of an ethics of responsibility and, thirdly, how the church handles the guilt it had incurred through its complicity that interested him, as did the question of how he himself and his associates in the conspiracy had to bear guilt.”<sup>146</sup>

According to the editors of *Ethics* Bonhoeffer was primarily occupied with the chapter “Guilt, Justification and Renewal” in 1941, a chapter that contains a concrete “Confession of Guilt” on the part of the church.<sup>147</sup> This chapter was preceded by the chapter “Inheritance and Decay,” which in a broad *geistesgeschichtliche* tour d’horizon introduces into the problems of the Christians’ participation in history. In this chapter Bonhoeffer had written that “it is the fact of the appearance of Jesus Christ” that “evokes the question of our historical heritage.” More precisely, “the line of our forefathers reaches back” even “before the appearance of Jesus Christ into the people of Israel,” because “Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah of the Israelite-Jewish people.” Therefore, “Western history is by God’s will inextricably bound up with the people of Israel.” Later, probably after his return from the second journey to Switzerland in 1941, Bonhoeffer added in the margin of the page that this inextricable link between Western history and Israel is to be understood “not just genetically but in an honest, unceasing encounter. The Jews keep open the question of Christ; they are the sign of God’s free, gracious election [*freie Gnadenwahl*] and of God’s rejecting wrath.” Here Bonhoeffer refers to Rom 11,22: “See the kindness and the severity of God.” Finally he notes his conviction most relevant to the contemporary situation: “An expulsion/rejection [*Verstoßung*] of the Jew(s) from the West must result in the rejection of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew.”<sup>148</sup>

The editors of *Ethics* mention in a footnote that in the night of 16 to 17 October 1941 the mass deportations of Jews from Berlin residences had started, suggesting that Bonhoeffer’s insertion should be read as a reaction onto the contemporary history. There is no reason to draw this contextualization into doubt. However, Bonhoeffer’s specific choice of words – “Verstoßung” can be translated by “rejection” or “repudiation” as well as by

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<sup>146</sup> E. Bethge, “Bemerkungen,” in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Schweizer Korrespondenz 1941/42*, Theologische Existenz heute, Neue Folge, 214 (Munich 1932), 26. Cf. Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Letter to Paul Vogt (22 September 1941) in *DBWE* 16, 218–219 (*DBW* 16, 207).

<sup>147</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 6, 138–141 (*DBW* 6, 129–132). This confession ends with a reference to the connection between God’s justification and human justice resembling Barth’s essay “Rechtfertigung und Recht” (Church and State): The church “has not so proclaimed the justice of God that all human law must see there it’s own source and essence” (141; translation altered).

<sup>148</sup> *DBWE* 6, 105 (*DBW* 6, 95); translation altered.

“expulsion” or “driving out” – signals an allusion to the doctrine of “Israel and the Church,” which Barth was developing at the begin of the forties in the context of the “Doctrine of God” of his *Church Dogmatics* in a great paraphrase of *Romans* 9 to 11.<sup>149</sup> When Bonhoeffer uses the term “free gracious election” he uses a recognizable Barthian term: In Barth’s “Doctrine of God” the term “gracious election” [*Gnadenwahl*] serves at dismissing a misunderstanding in the traditional doctrine of predestination as something threatening. Describing God’s predestination as “gracious election” Barth wants to emphasize the “triumph of grace” over the repudiation.<sup>150</sup> Because God in Jesus Christ chooses the rejection for himself, there can be no rejected humans any more. In Barth’s exposition of Rom. 11, 17–22 we find the following phrasing: “He, who has Jesus in faith, cannot want *not* to have the Jews, he must have them together with Jesus as his ancestors and relatives. Otherwise he also cannot have the Jew Jesus. Otherwise he rejects with the Jews *Jesus* himself.”<sup>151</sup> The formulation resembles very much Bonhoeffer’s phrasing in *Ethics*.

When Bonhoeffer speaks of a polarity of “election-grace” and “repudiation” he makes clear that he, too, reflects on the doctrine of predestination. And it is not by chance that in his reflection on the relationship between the Christian West and the Jews he uses “Barthian” terminology. However, the volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* referred to was published only after Bonhoeffer had inserted the passage into his *Ethics*. Thus we must assume that the topic was part of the “conversations” with Barth in March and September 1941. In addition, it is likely that during his Swiss journeys Bonhoeffer had got knowledge of Barth’s address “Our Church and Switzerland Today” (November 1940), which in summer 1941 had earned him a ban on speaking in Switzerland. In his address Barth had described “the rough and fine maltreatment of the Jews” in Germany as the real core of “the foreign rule and tyranny imminent today.” And he had concluded that “the inner center of the empire rising today” consisted “in hate against and rejection [*Verstoßung*] of the Jews. ... But the Son of Man, who was God’s Son, was a Jew ... We cannot bow to this empire, because we cannot reject the salvation, which has come to the Jews and has come to us from the Jews.”<sup>152</sup> With this statement and Bonhoeffer’s similar insertion into his

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<sup>149</sup> *CD* (*KD* II/2, 1942), § 34. “Die Erwählung der Gemeinde,” especially section 1. Israel und die Kirche, 215–226.

<sup>150</sup> *KD* II/2, 214.

<sup>151</sup> *KD* II/2, 318f.

<sup>152</sup> K. Barth, “Unsere Kirche und die Schweiz in der heutigen Zeit,” in K. Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme 1938-1945*, 161 and 175.

*Ethics* the tendency of proselytism regarding the Jews, which was widespread in the Confessing Church, is called into question for the first time.<sup>153</sup>

From 11–26 May 1942, the third of Bonhoeffer's journeys to Switzerland during his conspiratorial activities took place. He immediately procured the page proofs of the as yet unpublished volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (CD II/2).<sup>154</sup> Still in Switzerland, and even before the visit to Barth, Bonhoeffer initially studied the second chapter of that volume, the one dealing with ethics.<sup>155</sup> The influence of Bonhoeffer's reading of this volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* can be demonstrated in the shift of accent in the understanding of "responsibility" in the two versions of the chapter "History and Good," conceived earlier and later in 1942. Whereas the first version explains "responsibility" more or less in the line of Max Weber,<sup>156</sup> the second version adopts Barth's explanation of "responsibility" in the light of "Christ as our life"<sup>157</sup> as "answerability," that is: answering to God's word in Christ. Now Bonhoeffer writes: "This life, lived in answer to the life of Jesus Christ (as the Yes and No to our life), we call 'responsibility.' ... Responsibility thus means to risk one's life in its wholeness, aware that one's activity is a matter of life and death."<sup>158</sup> Accordingly the precision of "reality" in Bonhoeffer's description of responsibility in the section on "The Structure of Responsible Life" as "being in accord with reality," where reality means "*the Real One* [*der Wirkliche*], namely the God who became human," can be regarded as an allusion to Barth's *Church Dogmatics* II/2.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>153</sup> For more details cf. A. Pangritz, "Marginalie zu Bonhoeffers Ethik," in: *Momente der Begegnung. Impulse für das christlich-jüdische Gespräch*, edited by M. Haarmann et al. (Wuppertal/Neukirchen-Vluyn 2004), 206–212; cf. also in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Yearbook/Jahrbuch* 2 (2005), 210–217.

<sup>154</sup> *KD* II/2: "Die Lehre von Gott [The Doctrine of God]," chapters 7: "God's Gracious Election," and 8: "God's Commandment."

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Letter to K. Barth (13 May 1942) in *DBWE* 16, 276–277 (*DBW* 16, 266–267). Cf. E. Bethge, "Bemerkungen," 28: "Since Bonhoeffer was working on his own 'Ethics' and was grappling with new approaches, and because earlier he had critically questioned Barth precisely in relation to ethics, he particularly wanted to know how the master approached this complex of issues." After his imprisonment Bonhoeffer managed to have Barth's "doctrine of predestination (unbound)" smuggled even into prison (cf. *LPP*, 171).

<sup>156</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 6, 220 (*DBW* 6, 219). The manuscript breaks off where "political action" is defined as "taking on responsibility. This cannot happen without power. Power is to serve responsibility" (245).

<sup>157</sup> *DBWE* 6, 248–251 (*DBW* 6, 246–249).

<sup>158</sup> *DBWE* 6, 254–255 (*DBW* 6, 254). Cf. K. Barth, *KD* II/2, 713–714: "Wir leben verantwortlich, d.h. unser Sein, Wollen, Tun und Lassen ist ... ein fortwährendes Antworten auf das uns als Gebot gesagte Wort Gottes."

<sup>159</sup> *DBWE* 6, 261 (*DBW* 6, 260). Cf. also *DBWE* 6, 325 (*DBW* 6, 328), the section "The Love of God and the Desintegration of the World," where Bonhoeffer emphasizes

Again, in the chapter "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World", written toward the end of 1942, we find allusions to Barth. When Bonhoeffer starts describing "Christian ethics" as an "attack on the presuppositions of all other ethics" and therefore as a "critique of all ethics,"<sup>160</sup> he clearly refers once more to the second edition of Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*, where Barth in the chapter "The Problem of Ethics" commenting on Rom 12,1 had written. When "a Church embarks upon moral exhortation, its exhortation can be naught else but a criticism of all human behaviour."<sup>161</sup>

Still, the last chapters Bonhoeffer wrote for his *Ethics*, before his work was halted by his arrest, were influenced by his reading of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. At issue is "The 'Ethical' and the 'Christian' as a Topic" as well as "The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates," drafted early in 1943. Here Bonhoeffer tries to find a new solution for his quest for a concrete commandment. Following closely Barth's ethical argumentation in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, he wants to understand "the commandment of God" as "permission," namely, the "permission to live before God as a human being." And he characterizes the commandment of God: "It is distinguished from all human laws in that it *commands freedom*."<sup>162</sup> In the chapter "The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates" Bonhoeffer tries to concretize the social dimension of the divine commandment in the four "mandates" which occur "in the church, in marriage and family, in culture, and in government."<sup>163</sup>

When, in 1949, Bethge published Bonhoeffer's manuscripts for the *Ethics*, Barth made use of it in the fourth part-volume of his *Doctrine of Creation*, containing the ethical chapter on "The Commandment of God, the Creator," praising Bonhoeffer's "brilliant 'Ethics'" for its orientation towards the dogmatical context.<sup>164</sup> However, Bonhoeffer's "doctrine of the mandates", this concededly "constructive" attempt, did not find Barth's approval. He wondered whether an enumeration of precisely those four

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that Christ is "not some kind of neutral entity, but the historical person of Jesus himself." Cf. Karl Barth, *KD* II/2, 565: "kein Neutrum, sondern eine Person."

<sup>160</sup> *DBWE* 6, 299–300 (*DBW* 6, 301–302).

<sup>161</sup> K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (second edition), 413. The original reads: "Es ist, wenn es zu *Ethik* kommen soll, nichts anderes möglich, als Kritik alles *Ethos*."

<sup>162</sup> *DBWE* 6, 382 (*DBW* 6, 386). Cf. K. Barth, *KD* II/2, 650 (*CD* II/2, 585): "The form by which the command of God is distinguished from all other commands ... consists in the fact that it is permission – the granting of a very definitive freedom [*Gewährung einer ganz bestimmten Freiheit*]."

<sup>163</sup> *DBWE* 6, 388 (*DBW* 6, 392). The notion of "the four mandates of God" appears first in an insertion, made in 1941, into the first manuscript for the *Ethics*, entitled "Christ, Reality and Good. Christ, the Church and the World," of 1940; cf. *DBWE* 6, 68 (*DBW* 6, 54–55).

<sup>164</sup> *KD* III/4, 2.

mandates with an appeal to Scripture “does not still contain some arbitrary elements” and whether those mandates had to be about relations of authority rather than relations of freedom.<sup>165</sup>

While on his second journey to Switzerland, Bonhoeffer apparently also had an open exchange with Barth about his secret activity. Subsequently he believed that everything was “now clear” between him and Barth in relation to this matter. He refers to this when, at the beginning of the third journey, he learns of the rumour that his newest visit to Switzerland was “uncanny” for Barth “because of my commission.” In the interest of “the admittedly difficult effort to continue our solidarity,” he tells Barth “that at least in the eastern part of Germany there are only few who have remained as loyal to you in countless conversations over these years as I have attempted to do.”<sup>166</sup> Thereupon Barth’s assistant Charlotte von Kirschbaum informs Bonhoeffer that there was indeed, in Barth’s circle of friends, the question “how it is that you have such freedom” but “in conversation with you the question was answered for him clearly.” However, she admits that “there actually is something ‘uncanny’ for Karl Barth,” not in relation to Bonhoeffer’s person but in relation to “all the attempts to save Germany from the evident misery into which it has now been plunged by still more ‘national’ undertakings. This includes those that the generals might venture. He has told you so himself and is ready to talk to you about it.”<sup>167</sup>

Here one may indeed detect a difference between Barth and Bonhoeffer in relation to the concrete forms that the “political worship” would need to take in the resistance against National Socialism.<sup>168</sup> However, as the so-called Operation Seven was being prepared – an attempt in 1942 to rescue a group of persecuted men and women of Jewish descent from the imminent deportation – Barth and Bonhoeffer cooperated in a very practical manner. With their support Charlotte Friedenthal, a coworker in the Con-

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<sup>165</sup> *KD* III/4, 21–22: “In Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of the mandates, one cannot entirely shake that little taste of North German patriarchalism ... Would it not be advisable ... [not to be] rushing on to the rigid assertion of human relationships arranged in a definite order, and the hasty assertion of their imperative character?” Interestingly, in his prison correspondence, Bonhoeffer himself relativized his “doctrine of the mandates” in a way that to a great extent anticipates Barth’s critique: “Our ‘Protestant’ (not Lutheran!) Prussian world has been so dominated by the four mandates that the sphere of freedom has receded into the background” (Letter to Renate and Eberhard Bethge (23 January 1944) in *LPP*, 193 (*DBW* 8, 291).

<sup>166</sup> Letter to K. Barth (17 May 1942) in *DBWE* 16, 277–279 (*DBW* 16, 267–269).

<sup>167</sup> C. v. Kirschbaum, Letter to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (17 May 1942) in *DBWE* 16, 279–280 (*DBW* 16, 270–271); cf. *More Bonhoeffer-Barth Correspondence*, edited by John D. Godsey, 7–8.

<sup>168</sup> In a letter to Jørgen Glenthøj (7 September 1956) Barth recalls that the “main topic” of his “conversation with Bonhoeffer at the time” had been the “question whether the planned new German government would be conservative or authoritarian, or have a democratic form;” cf. *DBWE* 16, 281, note 8 (*DBW* 16, 271, note 7).

fessing Church, was brought safely across the Swiss border on 5 September 1942, in the “disguise” of a spy of the “intelligence.”<sup>169</sup>

### VIII. Barth's Theology in Bonhoeffer's Prison Correspondence

We now turn to Bonhoeffer's renewed discussion of Barth's theology in the prison correspondence containing the famous or infamous reproach of “positivism of revelation” against Barth. It should be noted from the outset that every critical remark of Barth to be found in *Letters and Papers from Prison* is preceded by a praise of the Basilean theologian. Praise and blame of Barth should therefore carefully be weighed up against each other.

After Bethge, together with Bonhoeffer's parents and Maria von Wedemeyer, had found the opportunity to visit the prisoner on 26 November 1943, more than half a year after his incarceration, Bonhoeffer thanks for “Karl's cigar ... something really indescribable,” the gift he had received via Bethge, who in summer 1943 had visited Barth in Switzerland.<sup>170</sup> On Advent IV, 1943, he asks Bethge: “if you can get without difficulty Barth's *Doctrine of Predestination* (unbound), or his *Doctrine of God*, please have them sent to me.”<sup>171</sup> It seems that Bonhoeffer hoped to continue his theological work in prison with the help of these books. Perhaps the recent reading of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is reflected in Bonhoeffer's mention in March 1944 of Barth as one example among other representatives of “*hilaritas*,” which he describes as “a steadfast certainty that in their own work they are showing the world something good (even if the world doesn't like it), and a high-spirited self-confidence.”<sup>172</sup>

In the first “theological” letter from prison to Bethge (30 April 1944) Bonhoeffer starts his new “theological thoughts” on “the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.” He suggests that the “religious *a priori*” that had been the basis of “our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology,” did “not exist at all.”<sup>173</sup> This contestation of the basic assumption of liberal theology can be read as an implicit approval of Barth's criticism of religion. However, Bonhoeffer's description of the “religious *a priori*” as a thinking, in

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Winfried Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben. Eine Rettungsaktion für vom Holocaust Bedrohte aus dem Amt Ausland/Abwehr im Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Frankfurt a. M., 1993), 70–82 and 290–306.

<sup>170</sup> Letter to E. Bethge (26 November 1943) in *LPP*, 145 (*DBW* 8, 209).

<sup>171</sup> Letter to E. Bethge, Fourth Advent (19 December 1943) in *LPP*, 171 (*DBW* 8, 249); translation altered. Reference to K. Barth, *CD*, volumes II/1 and II/2, which Bonhoeffer had received during his journeys to Switzerland in 1941 and 1942.

<sup>172</sup> Letter to E. Bethge (9 March 1944) in *LPP*, 229 (*DBW* 8, 352).

<sup>173</sup> Letter to E. Bethge (30 April 1944) in *LPP*, 279–280 (*DBW* 8, 402–403).

which “Christianity’ has always been a form – perhaps the true form – of ‘religion’,” seems to include Barth, who in his *Church Dogmatics* had developed the “problem of religion” in a dialectic of “religion as unbelief” and “true religion,” where the church is the “place of true religion.”<sup>174</sup> It can be left open here, if Bonhoeffer’s description of this “a priori” as “a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression” is in complete accordance with Barth or not.<sup>175</sup> In any case Bonhoeffer continues his reflections praising Barth, who was “the only one to have started along this line of thought,” that is along the line of “religionless Christianity.” However, he “did not carry it to completion, but arrived at a positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration. For the religionless worker or human being in general nothing decisive is gained here.” Bonhoeffer’s concern is a “Christian life in a religionless world,” in which Christ “is no longer an object of religion but ... really the Lord of the world.”<sup>176</sup>

In the next letter (5 May 1944) we read again that “Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion,” which “remains his really great merit.” However, he put in the place of religion “a positivist doctrine of revelation which says, in effect, ‘Take it or leave it’: virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else; each is an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as a whole or not at all.” But that is “unbiblical,” for there are “degrees of knowledge and degrees of significance. ... The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is – by Christ’s incarnation! – a gift for us. In the place of religion there now stands the church – that is in itself biblical – but the world is in some degree made to depend on itself and left to its own devices, and that’s the mistake.”<sup>177</sup>

There is a third letter (8 June 1944), in which Bonhoeffer praises Barth’s merits before uttering his criticism. Now he writes that “Barth was the first to realize the mistake” that all the apologetic attempts of Heim, Althaus and Tillich “(which were all, in fact, still sailing, though unintentionally, in the channel of liberal theology) were making in leaving clear a space for religion in the world or against the world. He brought in against

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. K. Barth, *KD I/2*, 304ff. Cf. already K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, second, revised edition, 211ff. (chapter “Freedom” with the sections “The boundaries of religion,” “The meaning of religion” and “The reality of religion”).

<sup>175</sup> Ernst Feil, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 173, maintains that Bonhoeffer’s reflections on “non-religious Christianity” are conceived mainly in the way of “Geistesgeschichte,” whereas Barth’s criticism of religion is to be understood primarily as a “systematic concept.”

<sup>176</sup> *LPP*, 280–281 (*DBW* 8, 405); translation altered.

<sup>177</sup> *LPP*, 286 (*DBW* 8, 415); translation altered.



religion the God of Jesus Christ, ‘*pneuma* against *sarx*.’ That remains his greatest merit (his *Epistle to the Romans*, second edition, in spite of all the neo-Kantian egg-shells). Through his later dogmatics, he enabled the church to effect this distinction, in principle, all along the line.” And then Bonhoeffer, in contrast to his own earlier criticism, continues: “It was not in ethics, as is often said, that he subsequently failed – his ethical observations, as far as they exist” – Bonhoeffer would have had the ethical section of *Church Dogmatics* II/2 in mind – “are just as important as his dogmatic ones.” Now Bonhoeffer’s criticism refers to another point: “it was that in the non-religious interpretation of theological concepts he gave no concrete guidance, either in dogmatics or in ethics. There lies his limitation, and because of it his theology of revelation has become positivist, a ‘positivism of revelation’, as I put it.”<sup>178</sup>

Even more serious is the charge against the Confessing Church, which according to Bonhoeffer “has now largely forgotten all about the Barthian approach, and has lapsed from positivism of revelation into conservative restoration.”<sup>179</sup> Bonhoeffer’s concern is to “overcome” liberal theology, which, albeit still negatively, determines even Barth, by genuinely taking up and answering “its question,” something that “is *not* the case in the Confessing Church’s positivism of revelation!”<sup>180</sup> It is therefore not by chance that the last reported note by Bonhoeffer on Barth – without employing the term of “positivism of revelation” any longer – is directed against a certain conservative “Barthianism” within the Confessing Church rather than against Barth himself. In his “Outline for a Book” (August 1944) Bonhoeffer writes: “Barth and the Confessing Church bring about that one entrenches oneself persistently behind the ‘faith of the church’ and never asks and declares what one really believes. That is why there blows no fresh breeze in the Confessing Church either.”<sup>181</sup>

Unfortunately, research to date has had to find its way in heavy fog in relation to the precise meaning of the term “positivism of revelation” in Bonhoeffer’s prison correspondence.<sup>182</sup> Worse than that is the claim that everybody pretends to know what Bonhoeffer meant to chide Barth for,

<sup>178</sup> Letter to E. Bethge (8 June 1944) in *LPP*, 328 (*DBW* 8, 480–481).

<sup>179</sup> *LPP*, 328 (*DBW* 8, 481). Bonhoeffer continues: “The important thing about that church is that it carries on the great concepts of Christian theology; but it seems as if doing this is gradually just about exhausting it.”

<sup>180</sup> *LPP*, 329 (*DBW* 8, 482). It should be noted that in this last mention of “positivism of revelation” the charge is directed not against Barth, but against the Confessing Church.

<sup>181</sup> “Outline for a Book,” in *LPP*, 382 (*DBW* 8, 559–560); translation altered.

<sup>182</sup> Cf. A. Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 82ff. and Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionsless Christianity*, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge 1999).

namely, the “Old Testament, prophetic,”<sup>183</sup> the authoritarian gesture “vertically from above” that does not sit well with the interpreters. “When one was tired of Karl Barth one could go to Bonhoeffer’s ‘positivism of revelation’ for ammunition,” Bethge said.<sup>184</sup> But such false certainty in relation to the point of Bonhoeffer’s polemics does not match well the admiration Bonhoeffer still held for Barth’s “really great merit.”

Besides, it should be noted that the term “positivism of revelation” originally was used in the faculty of theology at the University of Berlin as an approving characterization of the “irrationality” or even “anti-rationality” of Luther’s theology, in which faith asserts the divine revelation as the “positively” given reality against all “natural” reason.<sup>185</sup> In *Act and Being* Bonhoeffer had – with similar terminology – criticized Barth for his tendency to emphasize God’s freedom beyond the “contingent positivity” of revelation and thereby to “rationalize” it.<sup>186</sup> In contrast to this language, “positivism of revelation” is used as a charge against Barth and even more seriously against the Confessing Church in Bonhoeffer’s prison correspondence. It is therefore difficult to describe a simple continuity between Bonhoeffer’s early criticism of Barth and his later reproach.

When, in 1951, Eberhard Bethge published for the first time Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Barth reacted confused with respect to Bonhoeffer’s rebuke of “positivism of revelation.” He wrote: “Now he has left us alone with the enigmatic utterances of his letters – at more than one point clearly showing that he sensed, without really knowing, how the story should continue – for example, what exactly he meant by the ‘positivism of revelation’ he found in me, and especially how the programme of an unreligious speech was to be realized.” And Barth added the advice to rest content in “remaining behind, somewhat confused,” in order “to take the best” of Bonhoeffer.<sup>187</sup> It seems that Barth, like Bonhoeffer, is not aware of the fact that he himself first had spoken about a biblically qualified non-religious “wordliness” in his Araau address on “Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas” (1920), an address that had provoked Harnack’s

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<sup>183</sup> Bethge, Letter to Bonhoeffer (3 June 1944) in *LPP*, 317 (*DBW* 8, 463).

<sup>184</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 890.

<sup>185</sup> The church historian Erich Seeberg, son of Bonhoeffer’s supervisor Reinhold Seeberg, used the term in this way in his book *Luthers Theologie. Motive und Ideen*, volume 1 (Göttingen 1929), 185 and 218. Cf. G. Krause, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” *TRE* 7, 58.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. *DBWE* 2, 124 (*DBWE* 2, 122).

<sup>187</sup> K. Barth, Letter to P. W. Herrenbrück (21 December 1952), in *World Come of Age*, 90–91.

protest.<sup>188</sup> Anyhow, Barth preferred to listen to Bonhoeffer's earlier writings rather than to the prison correspondence.<sup>189</sup>

In his posthumously published fragment on *The Christian Life*, Barth later came to a more cautious assessment of Bonhoeffer's non-religious "worldliness": "Because a Christian knows that the world out there is not just all darkness without light, one has the freedom ... to show solidarity with those out there in the world, in a serious manner, by standing unconditionally by their side. Something like this may have been on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mind in his last years of life."<sup>190</sup>

### IX. Conclusion and Evaluation

Since his first encounter with Barth's theology Bonhoeffer had developed his own theology in an ongoing debate with Barth, a debate that sometimes contained sharp criticisms as for instance in the charge of "positivism of revelation," that on the other hand never could suppress the fact that Barth remained the most important theological authority for Bonhoeffer among his contemporaries.

A number of models have been offered with respect to the "basic difference" between Barth and Bonhoeffer, which allegedly characterized their relationship right from the beginning, until Bonhoeffer's reproach of "positivism of revelation" got to the heart of it. Regin Prenter thought that he could demonstrate that from Bonhoeffer's early questions about Barth's doctrine of revelation there is "a straight line ... to the criticism of Barth's positivism of revelation." With Barth "everything points to eternity," while Bonhoeffer's road led "into temporality."<sup>191</sup> Another suggestion was presented by Heinrich Ott, who maintained that "the controversy between Barth and Bonhoeffer" did not refer to "a difference in *substance*"; the

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<sup>188</sup> Cf. K. Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 66: "Biblical piety is not really pious; one must rather characterize it as well-considered, qualified worldliness."

<sup>189</sup> K. Barth, Letter to P. W. Herrenbrück, (21 December 1952), in *World Come of Age*, 90–91. Cf. also Barth's letter to Hanfried Müller (7 April 1961), on occasion of the publication of Müller's dissertation on Bonhoeffer's theology (in *Weißenseer Blätter* (2006), 4): "It seems to me that in a really responsible representation of Bonhoeffer's theology Letters and Papers from Prison should be treated in an appendix only."

<sup>190</sup> K. Barth, "Das christliche Leben" in *KD IV/4*, *Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß, Vorlesungen 1959–1961*, edited by Hans-Anton Drewes and Eberhard Jüngel (Zurich 1976), 339.

<sup>191</sup> Regin Prenter, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth's Positivism of Revelation," in *World Come of Age*, 125–126 and 128.

difference was to locate “in *method*” or “theological language” instead.<sup>192</sup> James H. Burtness expressed the suspicion that “the two do divide on the *capax/non capax* question along classical Lutheran/Reformed lines.”<sup>193</sup> Although each of these suggestions has something to be said for it, they miss the decisive point: the basic agreement between Bonhoeffer and Barth.

More balanced are statements by Eberhard Bethge, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Paul Lehmann and John D. Godsey. In his biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Bethge writes: “While the early Barth, desiring to proclaim God’s majesty, began by removing him to a remote distance, Bonhoeffer’s starting point, inspired by the same desire to proclaim his majesty, brought him into close proximity.”<sup>194</sup> Tödt suspected that “the most important basis” for Bonhoeffer’s critique of Barth in the prison correspondence was Barth’s treatment of “predestination and God’s commandment.” He asks: “Could Barth ... depict God’s pre-eminent sovereignty in such a way that human beings did not become puppets but emerged with spontaneity, as self-acting agents being of age in the condition of the world that God had made possible?” However, Tödt emphasizes that in their basic understanding of revelation and world the assumptions of Barth and Bonhoeffer are not controversial, but they “converge.”<sup>195</sup> Lehmann, too, relates the difference to a mutually shared concern, namely, their search for the concreteness of revelation. “For Barth, the *incapax* protected the concreteness of *God* in his revelation, as it were, on the giving end of the stick. For Bonhoeffer, the *capax* protected the concreteness of the *revelation* of God, as it were, on the receiving end of the stick, that is, in the reality of faith. For both, the major question of theology was the question of concreteness.”<sup>196</sup>

Godsey appears to be right: “Although the confessional differences are important, they are not decisive.”<sup>197</sup> He asks: “Can it be that the basic difference between Bonhoeffer and Barth has to do with their assessment of liberal theology and how it was to be overcome?”<sup>198</sup> And he suggests “that their deepest theological differences come at the point where they are most

<sup>192</sup> Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1971), 129 and 136.

<sup>193</sup> James H. Burtness, “As though God Were Not Given: Barth, Bonhoeffer and the *Finitum Capax Infiniti*,” in *Dialog* 19 (1980), 250.

<sup>194</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 134.

<sup>195</sup> Heinz Eduard Tödt, “Glauben in einer religionslosen Welt. Muß man zwischen Barth und Bonhoeffer wählen?,” in *Genf '76. Ein Bonhoeffer-Symposium*, ed. by Hans Pfeifer (Munich 1976), 100–101 and 104.

<sup>196</sup> Paul Lehmann, “The Concreteness of Theology: Reflections on the Conversation between Barth and Bonhoeffer,” in *Footnotes to a Theology: The Karl Barth Colloquium of 1972*, edited by Martin Rumscheidt (Waterloo 1974); cited by James H. Burtness, “As though God Were Not Given,” 251.

<sup>197</sup> John D. Godsey, “Barth and Bonhoeffer,” in *Quarterly Review* 7 (1987), 18.

<sup>198</sup> Godsey, “Barth and Bonhoeffer,” 23.

closely bound together. Both accepted the general guidelines of Chalcedon that in Jesus Christ there is united both true divinity and true humanity. But Barth tended to emphasize the divinity ... Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, stressed the hiddenness of divinity in the humiliated One." Finally, "Barth's theology tends toward a *theologia gloriae* in order to assure the *graceousness* of God's action in Christ ... In contrast, Bonhoeffer's theology is a *theologia crucis* in order to assure the *costliness* of God's grace in Christ." Yet, all these differences notwithstanding, Godsey does not want to play off Barth and Bonhoeffer against each other. "Barth and Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer and Barth. They make quite a team!"<sup>199</sup>

In this context it seems important to note a comment by Bethge in which he speaks of "A *Shift of Interest*" in Barth and Bonhoeffer that occurred at different times. "For all their mutual liking ..., each was at a different phase of his development. One had just arrived at the point of departure of the other – that is, the other was leaving the point that his companion was trying to reach."<sup>200</sup> This observation seems to be true not only for the moment of the first face-to-face encounter in Bonn in 1931, where Bethge refers to, but also for the other phases of their encounter. Throughout the different phases of this change-filled relationship Bethge's observation is valid: "Whatever the implications of Bonhoeffer's criticisms of Barth ... Bonhoeffer viewed these criticisms as coming from within, not outside, the Barthian movement."<sup>201</sup>

Summing up, it seems to be necessary in the first place to emphasize the fact that there is a great continuity of approval and even enthusiasm in Bonhoeffer with respect to Barth's theological approach. On the other hand Bonhoeffer continuously has his critical questions to ask. However, these criticisms do not form a straight line; rather, they resemble a winding path. The unclear charge of "positivism of revelation" in *Letters and Papers from Prison* should not be regarded as the key, by which the relationship as a whole can be interpreted. Sharper than this later reproach is Bonhoeffer's earlier criticism in *Act and Being*. And in the phase, when Bonhoeffer conceived his book *Discipleship* and organized the experiment of *Life Together* in Finkenwalde, there seems to have prevailed a certain distance, which was explained by Bonhoeffer as a time of "ongoing, silent discussion" with Barth. In the prison letters, on the other hand, where Bonhoeffer utters the reproach of "positivism of revelation," he praises Barth at the

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<sup>199</sup> Godsey, "Barth and Bonhoeffer," 26–27. Mention should also be made of the fact that one of the first comprehensive studies about Bonhoeffer's theology, John D. Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1960), was written under Barth's supervision in Basle.

<sup>200</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 179.

<sup>201</sup> Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 178; translation altered.

same time as “the first one” and even “the only one” to have started directing theology towards a new perspective which Bonhoeffer shares.

Barth’s latest statement regarding Bonhoeffer handed down to us is his letter to Bethge on occasion of his reading of Bethge’s recently published biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Concerning Bonhoeffer’s attitude towards “the question of the Jews” Barth writes that “for a long time now I have considered myself guilty of not having raised it with equal emphasis during the church struggle.” Barth is thinking particularly of “the two Barmen Declarations I composed in 1934.” In his view, a different text would not have been accepted then, “but this does not excuse the fact that I (my interests lay elsewhere) did not offer at least formal resistance in this matter at that time.”<sup>202</sup> Barth is surprised reading that he himself had become and remained so “impressive” to Bonhoeffer, in spite of the reproach of “positivism of revelation.” What Barth thinks is most important in Bonhoeffer’s life is the “journey from Christian faith to *political* action,” a journey which Barth maintains had been his own, too. The fact that his own theology had been perceived in Germany as something apolitical, is due, at least in part, to his exercise of political restraint during the Weimar period of the twenties, as Barth concedes. He regards Bonhoeffer’s strong insistence on ethical clarification as an “overdue completion,” of what Barth himself had had in mind. “Germany, burdened with the problem of her Lutheran tradition, was very much in need of a ‘refresher course’ in just the outlook which I presupposed without so many words and emphasized merely in passing, namely ethics, brother/sisterliness, a servant church, discipleship, Socialism, movements for peace – and throughout all these in politics. Obviously, Bonhoeffer sensed this void and the need to fill it with increasing urgency right from the start and gave expression to it on a very broad front.”<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> K. Barth, Letter to Eberhard Bethge (22 May 1967) in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, 119.

<sup>203</sup> K. Barth, in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, 120–121; translation altered.