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Original publication:

Prüller-Jagenteufel, Gunter

Following Christ in Contemporary Times. A European Perspective Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in: Prüller-Jagenteufel, Gunter/ Mendoza, Ruben C. / Ladner, Gertraud (eds.), *In Service for a Servant Church. Outlines and Challenges for Catholic Theology Today*. Documentation of the INSeCT Conferences in Manila 2019 and Vienna 2020, pp. 15–24

Paderborn/Wien: Brill 2023 (Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society 22)

https://doi.org/10.30965/9783657790234_003

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Originalpublikation:

Prüller-Jagenteufel, Gunter

Following Christ in Contemporary Times. A European Perspective Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in: Prüller-Jagenteufel, Gunter/ Mendoza, Ruben C. / Ladner, Gertraud (Hrsg.), *In Service for a Servant Church. Outlines and Challenges for Catholic Theology Today*. Documentation of the INSeCT Conferences in Manila 2019 and Vienna 2020, S. 15–24

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Following Christ in Contemporary Times

A European Perspective Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel

Abstract

In current times, the division in the church is manifest: Some are following the 'Benedict Option' to remove from the 'world' and try to establish a counter culture of 'pure' Christian life. Others prefer rather a clear 'option for the poor' and try to get involved with the marginalized to struggle for a better, more human world. The latter would also prove to be in line with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of Christian life in a secular world: Bearing witness to a God who can be found nowhere else than in the form of human flesh – especially in human suffering.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; public theology; political theology

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ today? This question is old and still always new. Each generation of Christians in ever so different contexts has to find their own answers. I, for example, have been formed by the theology that is expressed in the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits, more than 40 years ago: "What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes."¹

The Asian-European Dialogue Ruben Mendoza and I organized in collaboration with Asian and European theological societies reflects this orientation: This Conference, "Our Kairos – Common Challenges in Different Perspectives", is an opportunity to develop this basic question further by looking for its meaning in the fields of politics, social justice, peace, integrity of creation, migration, and family life.

Ruben Mendoza and I want to clarify our perspectives before we engage in detailed discussion of these subjects. So the focus of my short introductory

1 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuit Order (1975): Decree 2: Jesuits Today, no 2.

statement is: How can we as a church best serve the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized to prepare the way for the Reign of God? And my task is to do this from a specific European perspective, while at the same time looking at the whole world.

1 Are we facing a “Bonhoeffer Moment”?

In recent decades we have seen problematic developments in Europe. On the one hand, the importance of churches and of Christian faith in general in the public sphere is declining; on the other hand, certain parts of the churches turn to an increasingly fundamentalist reading of their faith. So a growing group of non-believers, or at least ‘non-church-goers’, is faced with a small but ever more militant group of self-proclaimed ‘true Christians’. And of course there still is a middle ground that is built of a larger, but less outspoken group.

To analyze this situation, I turn to a German theologian from the Lutheran Church who started to develop a theology for the secular world: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). In Europe he is well known for his active participation in the resistance against Hitler’s regime. He even took part in a plot to kill him, a plot which failed, and consequently was hanged in a Nazi concentration camp just a few weeks before the end of World War II. In the Protestant Church, as well as in the Catholic one, many consider Bonhoeffer a martyr for justice and peace. His example and his theological reasoning put the question to the Church and to every single Christian: Where do we stand? So it is no surprise that every now and then, in precarious times, Christians invoke the memory of Bonhoeffer by calling a certain challenging situation a ‘Bonhoeffer Moment’, meaning that decisive action is called for. But is it clear what a ‘Bonhoeffer Moment’ really means?

The readings are quite different: In July 1993, pro-life advocate and abortion clinic bomber Paul Hill cited Bonhoeffer’s involvement in “plotting the death of Hitler” to justify his actions. For Hill, murdering abortion providers seemed the only way to stop what he regarded as America’s own holocaust of innocent life.²

Another example: A commentator of an evangelical website in the US invoked the ‘Bonhoeffer Moment’ because of the legalization of same-sex marriages in 2015:

² Cf. Guth, *Claims on Bonhoeffer*.

We are facing a ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer Moment.’ You recall that he chose civil disobedience and disobeyed Nazi law that stated that protecting Jewish people was against the law. He was hung for his stand. He also said prior to his death, ‘Silence in the face of evil is evil itself. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.’³

Can violent ‘pro-lifers’ and homophobes really justify their actions with Bonhoeffer? The liberal magazine *Sojourners*, on the other hand, asked only last year: “Is this a Bonhoeffer moment?”⁴ Christians, so the commentator wrote, could not stand aside any longer, the situation called for decisive action – this time the ‘Bonhoeffer Moment’ was directed at Donald Trump’s intolerable conduct. So, obviously, what following Christ really means in our time is still a matter of debate among those who call themselves Christians.

2 Following Christ – but in Which Direction?

While the more left-leaning branches of Christian Churches in Europe rediscover the tradition of political theology and liberation theology – the up-to-date term would be: public theology⁵ – there are on the other hand strong tendencies to leave the world behind and live happily in a churchy context without the uncomfortable challenges that ‘the world’ poses to us. And there is a considerable number of young people attracted to those pentecostal/charismatic groups who quite often do not see the importance of social issues. There is even a growing number of bishops who are supporting these events and event locations, because they are happy with the number of young people going there, praying and celebrating liturgy. Young people who are not critical, who do not challenge them, but seem to be perfectly happy, loving Jesus and Mary, lining up for confession and taking up the task to live a ‘missionary life’. That means, more or less, to convince people to “recognize Jesus as their saviour and to surrender their lives to Jesus” – a phrase that is obviously open to any interpretation.

2.1 A ‘Benedict Option’ ...?

This is the kind of Christian life that has been supported strongly by Pope Benedikt XVI. He opted for a pure – nota bene: pure, not poor – church that is

³ Tomczak, *Church is Facing a Dietrich Bonhoeffer Moment*.

⁴ Hale/Williams, *Is this a Bonhoeffer Moment?*.

⁵ Cf. Storrar/William/Morton/Andrew, *Public Theology for the 21st Century*.

not 'contaminated' by the world. At a visit in Germany in 2010 he spoke about the necessity to 'liberate' the Church "from forms of worldliness".⁶ And in his encyclical letter 'Deus caritas est' (2005) he points it out:

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the state. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.⁷

So the Christian faith is working as a "purifying force for reason"⁸ and its "spiritual energy" should help people towards sacrifice. By no means would Benedict XVI. have conceded that the church could and should act as a player in the field of politics. Conservative Christians are quite happy with that, they stick to the so called "Benedict Option"⁹ – a famous book named after Benedict of Nursia, the monk father – to remove oneself from the daily quarrels of the world and live the Christian faith in a reclusive way.

It is the kind of church that values its purity and tranquillity more than its call to the service of the people, especially the poor and oppressed. A church acting in the latter way would be a church taking risks, risking error and mistakes, risking taking action without knowing the outcome in advance. This would be the Pope-Francis-Church, the church he speaks about in 'Evangelii Gaudium' (2013): "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security."¹⁰

This is something that can never be reconciled with Ratzinger's/Benedict XVI's idealistic ecclesiology. It rather sounds like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea on how the church should act today:

The church is wholly world! [...] The church has become quite worldly for our benefit. [...] The church is in the world: it does not wish to give a picture of the church-community of saints [...]. Renunciation of purity, a return to solidarity with the sinful world. [...] Renunciation of purity alone makes the church free!¹¹

6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Journey to Germany* (22–25 September 2011). Meetings with Catholics engaged in the life of the Church and society (25 September 2011).

7 DCE 28.

8 DCE 28.

9 Dreher, *The Benedict Option*.

10 EG 49.

11 DBWE 11, p. 328 et seq. Writings by Dietrich Bonhoeffer are quoted according to the English translation of Bonhoeffer's critical edition 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke', Barnett, Victoria J. et al. (eds.). 17 volumes, Minnesota 1998–2014 (abbr.: DBWE).

So, according to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, our task is precisely not to withdraw from the world; quite on the contrary! As Bonhoeffer puts it: "The isolation of the person from the world of things is idealistic, not Christian. Christ releases the person not from the world of things but from the world of sin; those are two different things."¹² Therefore the church must not form a pure 'counter world' but has to act in the world to prepare the way¹³ for the Kingdom.

In his early essay: 'Thy Kingdom Come! The Prayer of the Church-Community for God's Kingdom on Earth' (1933)¹⁴ Bonhoeffer strongly criticizes the "religious escapism" of "otherworldliness".¹⁵

Otherworldliness affords a splendid environment in which to live. When life begins to be difficult and oppressive, one leaps boldly into the air and soars, relieved and worry free, in the so-called eternal realm. [...] But Christ does not want these weaknesses; rather Christ makes the human being strong. Christ does not lead him into the otherworldliness of religious escapism. Rather, Christ returns him to the earth as its true son.¹⁶

Living on this earth, in our time, in our respective societies, means to partake in the day-to-day realities of human life – and it is precisely here where God can be found:

In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God.¹⁷

This 'return to earth', of course, is not only realistic, it is highly political, as can be seen by looking at Bonhoeffer's own life. To sum it up shortly:

- It is not our task to uphold 'radical Christian values' vis-à-vis a sinful world. Of course we have to speak up, we have to criticize injustice and oppression. But we must not fall into the trap of regarding 'the church' as utterly holy and 'the world' as utterly evil. As Pope Francis reminds us, we have to practice the "discernment of spirits".
- At the same time we must not simply 'adapt' ourselves to the world, we have to uphold a critical stance, so that we are able to interfere and join the struggle for justice, peace, and also, now more than ever, integrity of creation.

¹² DBWE 16, p. 546.

¹³ Cf. DBWE 6, p. 360.

¹⁴ DBWE 12, pp. 285-297.

¹⁵ DBWE 12, p. 286.

¹⁶ DBWE 12, p. 286.

¹⁷ DBWE 6, p. 55.

To be able to do that we need a church – no: We have to build a church – that stands firmly in the midst of this world and at the same time is deeply directed at Christ. Only in that way the church can make a difference for this very time and this very society. “The church therefore can proclaim not principles that are always true but rather only commandments that are true today. For that which is ‘always’ true is precisely not true ‘today’: God is for us ‘always’ God precisely ‘today’.”¹⁸

The very basis of Bonhoeffer’s theology is the idea that all our understanding, thinking, and doing has to be rooted in the concrete reality here and now, the reality where we encounter God in our brothers and sisters.

2.2 ... or a ‘*Preferential Option for the Poor and Oppressed*’?

“On Earth, God seeks to be honored by us in the other, and nowhere else.”¹⁹ By saying this, Bonhoeffer points out that Christian anthropology is rooted not primarily in theology of creation but rather in Christology: Theology of incarnation and theology of the cross clarify the true nature of the human person in the likeness of God:

In Christ’s incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now on attacks the least of the people attacks Christ, who took on human form and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. In community with the incarnate one, we are once again given our true humanity.²⁰

We are reminded here of Emmanuel Lévinas’ important concept of the ‘face’: the ‘brother/sister’ is not just a representative of a general ‘idea of humanity’ but they are the ‘true human being’, the image of God, and the only image of God I will encounter today and right here.

In his own historical context, Bonhoeffer links human dignity with suffering and human responsibility with compassion. It is in these specific real-life situations that the concept of human dignity is put to the litmus test. “We must learn to regard human beings less in terms of what they do and neglect to do and more in terms of what they suffer.”²¹

With this sentence, Bonhoeffer brings the idea of discipleship to new dimensions. If faith means to live by grace alone, then suffering – especially

¹⁸ DBWE 12, p. 359 et seq.

¹⁹ DBWE 12, p. 295.

²⁰ DBWE 4, p. 285. The ‘human countenance’ – in the German original: Menschenantlitz – is the same word that Emmanuel Lévinas uses when he speaks of the ‘face’ (visage) of the other.

²¹ DBWE 8, p. 45.

suffering injustice – means not only to follow Christ in a special sense. Rather, it is discipleship at its highest form. The suffering person not only resembles Christ, but actually is the image of Christ. Therefore Christians are called to seek out God’s image in the places of the marginalized and oppressed, of the suffering and of those who are killed.

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ’s greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ’s feeling and redeeming love for all who suffer. [...] Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.²²

3 ... Politically Distressing Times

In politically distressing times, where right-wing populism and outright fascism rise again, there is still one additional idea by Bonhoeffer that is worthwhile to consider. At the turn of the year 1942/1943, Bonhoeffer wrote a report to his friends to give account of his work in the resistance after 10 years of Nazi dictatorship. One short text has become especially popular, especially since the election of Donald Trump: Bonhoeffer’s analysis ‘On Stupidity’:²³

3.1 *Bonhoeffer on ‘Stupidity’*

Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. [...] Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one’s prejudgment simply need not be believed – in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical – and when facts are irrefutable, they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack.²⁴

Bonhoeffer considers stupidity “not an intellectual defect, but a human one”:²⁵ there are intellectuals who are stupid and simple people who are not stupid at

22 DBWE 8, p. 49.

23 DBWE 8, p. 43 et seq.

24 DBWE 8, p. 43.

25 DBWE 8, p. 43.

all – so it is rather a matter of character than of intellect. Even more: Bonhoeffer considers this kind of stupidity a “sociological problem”:²⁶

Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. [...] It seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances. The fact that the stupid person is often stubborn must not blind us to the fact that he is not independent. In conversation with him, one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with him as a person, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like [...]. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil.²⁷

We may think of the soldiers and police officers of the Nazi regime, but also of so many others who are blinded by the slogans and promises of any dictator or populist. But how can we face a situation like that? If we trust in the power of reason we will be disappointed, because we do not deal with reason here but with emotion, with the sanctity of idols and the hate against any challenging of those. This is the reason why Bonhoeffer points out:

Yet at this very point it becomes quite clear that only an act of liberation, not instruction, can overcome stupidity. Here we must come to terms with the fact that in most cases a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it. [...] This state of affairs explains why in such circumstances our attempts to know what ‘the people’ really think are in vain and why, under these circumstances, this question is so irrelevant for the person who is thinking and acting responsibly.²⁸

Bonhoeffer decided to act not with the people but for the people. I can understand and respect that, because in a situation like that there might be no ‘with’. But to take this decision is also very dangerous: Who am I to know what is best for others? Isn’t this exactly the kind of colonialism and elitism that we fought so hard to overcome? I, personally, would not want to give up on reasonable dialogue and democratic procedures. But hasn’t Bonhoeffer also a point in his scepticism?

26 DBWE 8, p. 43.

27 DBWE 8, p. 44.

28 DBWE 8, p. 44.

3.2 *What Shall We Do?*

At the meeting of the German Bonhoeffer society in September 2019, a theologian quite knowledgeable in the field of sociology gave his analysis of that problem.²⁹ I want to share just a few of his ideas for further discussion:

- 1 Right-wing populism is a phenomenon that cannot be countered by reason – Bonhoeffer saw as much – because it is rooted in emotions. What we see in social media and on the political stage are expressions of a “society of anger”.³⁰ This anger is a reaction against the social distortions brought about by post-modern social complexity and neo-liberal globalization. Anger is not a rational construct, but a reflex rooted in fear – and populists play the instrument of fear and anger excellently. Usually they direct the fear – and the anger – at specific marginalized groups that are defined as ‘the other’: strangers, refugees, gay people, the political left etc.
- 2 The escapism of the more conservative groups in our Christian churches is another reaction to that fear, that comes with the confusion and complexity of the modern world. One falls into anger, the other into escapism – both out of despair. If there were hope, anger as well as escapism could be overcome.
- 3 Since we deal with strong emotions – and fear mostly leads either to the reflex of aggression/anger or to the reflex of flight/escapism – the answer cannot be given by reason alone. The best way to overcome fear is to engage in friendly face-to-face contact with excluded ‘others’ and to engage in meaningful social action to face the real problems of our time. Sociological surveys show that personal encounters reduce fear and the sense of threat and consequently lead to higher empathy and to willingness to change perspective.³¹

I am truly convinced that an inclusive church, following the model of Pope Francis and his programmatic exhortation ‘*Evangelii Gaudium*’, could provide just that space of friendly encounter that our societies need today. But it is not an easy task, nor will the objective be achieved quickly. So the other option – Bonhoeffer’s option – still stands as a last resort: external liberation has to precede the internal. But how would we combine both? How do we know which one is the timely choice? The matter is open for discussion.

29 Cf. Lohmann, *Was hilft gegen den Rassismus?*, pp. 21–39.

30 Cf. Koppetsch, *Die Gesellschaft des Zorns*.

31 Cf. Pettigrew/Tropp, *A Meta-Analytical Test of Intergroup Contact Theory*, pp. 751–783.

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Religion and Transformation in Contemporary European Society

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Volume 22

Gunter Prüller-Jagenteufel, Ruben C. Mendoza,
Gertraud Ladner (Eds.)

In Service for a Servant Church

*Outlines and Challenges for Catholic Theology Today.
Documentation of the INSeCT Conferences in
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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data available online: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

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www.schoeningh.de

Cover design: Evelyn Ziegler, Munich
Production: Brill Deutschland GmbH, Paderborn

ISSN 2198-5235
ISBN 978-3-506-79023-1 (hardback)
ISBN 978-3-657-79023-4 (e-book)