

THE IDEA OF THE INCOGNITO: A Christological Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Non-Religious Christianity"

SZABADOS ÁDÁM

In the last five decades many attempts have been made to interpret Dietrich Bonhoeffer's puzzling thoughts on a "non-religious Christianity". Some of these interpretations approach Bonhoeffer's "new theology"¹ from an *ecclesiological* angle. (What is the role of the Church in Bonhoeffer's late vision? Is there still a place in this vision for the communion of the saints? Should the Church maintain a separate identity? What form must the Church have in this "non-religious" phase?) Others interpreted Bonhoeffer from the perspective of the Church's struggle with *secularism* in the 1960's. (Do we need to believe in a God after he "proved to be" superfluous in our world? Can we simply accept the world as it is and not try to change it? Or is Bonhoeffer's "new theology" mainly about language: *speaking as if* God didn't exist?)

Although these approaches have their own legitimate roles in the interpretation of Bonhoeffer's "new theology", I accept the position of Ebeling and Bethge that our interpretation must primarily be a *christological* one.²

1. The Primacy of Christology

For Bonhoeffer "christology is *the* discipline, *par excellence*... it stands alone".³ His main concern in Tegel, too, is not so much what the *Church* but what the *disciple of Christ* ought to be like in a world "come of age". This does not mean that Bonhoeffer was not interested in the form of the Church. Discipleship is always connected with the Church, the two are inseparable for him. "No one can become a new man except by entering the Church, and becoming a

¹ A term used by Eberhardt Bethge referring to Bonhoeffer's new phase of thinking in Tegel prison, expressed in *Letters and Papers from Prison* and to a minor degree in the *Ethics*. Since we have these thoughts only in germs, all thinking about them must necessarily be inconclusive.

² "Theologically the 'non-religious interpretation' is clearly prepared for in the Christology that Bonhoeffer had followed since his early days. Ebeling has rightly pointed out that this 'interpretation' is first and last a christological one." (E. Bethge: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Collins, London, 1977, p. 760.)

³ D. Bonhoeffer: *Christology*, Collins, London, 1966, p. 28.

member of the Body of Christ.”⁴ We know from the outline of the book he planned to write, but never had the time to finish, that he obviously wanted to discuss ecclesiastical issues, too, including some practical advises as to what the Church should do in the new world-situation (selling all properties, etc.). But for Bonhoeffer, discipleship always primarily had to do with christology, “the discipline”.⁵ “[T]he most precious thing in Christianity is Jesus Christ Himself. He is the centre and the strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice and of culture.”⁶ Discipleship is following *Jesus*, it is the imitation of *Christ*.

Hence christology must be taken into account first, ecclesiology second. Bonhoeffer deduces his ideas on discipleship from his understanding of the person and work of Christ. True, the disciple is in the Church, but the shape of the Church is defined by Christ, the head of the body. Bonhoeffer’s view of the Church is a result of his christological concerns. The Church is always the *Body of Christ*. Bonhoeffer has an unusually high view on the unity of Christ and His Church. The Church is not the Body of Christ in a metaphorical sense, only. “The community *is* the body of Christ, it does not *represent* the body of Christ... Christ is not only the head of the community but also the community itself... Christ is head and every member.”⁷ The Church, therefore, is what Christ is. When the role of Christ changes in the world, His Body changes, too.

In Tegel Bonhoeffer is still thinking in christological terms. His interest in the future of the Church comes from his interest in *Christ’s* future role in the world. The focus of his interest in Tegel is less the communion of the saints⁸, more the theme of “Nachfolge”, the imitation of Christ, the new forms of discipleship. His concern is the disciple in relation to his Master. The realisation of this relationship determines the shape of the Body of Christ in the world. Christology precedes ecclesiology. His questions in Tegel can be summed up in this: *What does it mean to be a follower of Christ in the new situation?* Or even more important is the question that precedes it: *Who is Christ in this new situation?* Christology plays the central role, because the disciple should always be what Christ is. “What is bothering me incessantly”,

⁴ D. Bonhoeffer: *The Cost of Discipleship*, SMC, London, 2000, p. 218. (The book was recently republished under the title *Discipleship*. In this essay I take quotations from the older version, but when I refer to the book itself, I use the new title, which better fits the original German title, *Nachfolge*.)

⁵ “In the first period, Bonhoeffer’s central concern was that the church understand itself as community. His concern in the middle period was for costly discipleship. And at the end of his life, he focused on ‘worldly holiness’. Yet one theme provides a unifying thread throughout Bonhoeffer’s varied theological writings. Central to the whole is christology.” (S. Grenz-R. Olson: *20th-Century Theology*, IVP, Illinois, 1992, p. 149-150.)

⁶ D. Bonhoeffer: *Ethics*, Collins, London, 1964, p. 56.

⁷ *Christology*, p. 60-61.

⁸ In fact, by the end of his first year in prison he personally felt a sort of inner distance from religious people: “I often ask myself why a ‘Christian instinct’ often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious, by which I don’t in the least mean with any evangelizing intention, but, I might almost say, ‘in brotherhood’.” (D. Bonhoeffer: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, SCM, London, 1973, p. 281.)

says Bonhoeffer, “is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.”⁹

This “today” is significant. Bonhoeffer never sees Christ as an objective reality that could be described before we meet Him in the existential situation where we are. He is the *pro me* first, he is existentially present, he encounters us right where we are. This necessitates a certain kind of redefinition of who Christ is for us in our existential situation. This redefinition does not mean that we could hold heretical views about his person – heresy is an important concept for Bonhoeffer!¹⁰ – but that the disciple always has to ask the question “Who are you?” before he knows where his Master is. This existential interpretation of Christ explains some of the stunning statements Bonhoeffer makes in Tegel about the changing patterns of discipleship. These statements are coherent with the nature of Bonhoeffer’s christology.¹¹

The christological idea that summarises Bonhoeffer’s developing thoughts on the new kind of discipleship is the idea of the *incognito*. The “new Christian” will be a disciple in *incognito*. His *incognito* is simply the imitation of the *incognito* of his Master. Though it sounds radical and original, this is not a new idea that Bonhoeffer invented. It is a concept Soren Kierkegaard had used a hundred years earlier to describe the nature of Christ’s presence in the world. We will see the cruciality of this idea when we see it applied to the disciples. I will argue that *Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious” Christianity is basically the disciple’s imitation of the incognito of his Master*. I shall attempt to show how the idea of the *incognito* can be a key to understand the new discipleship Bonhoeffer advocated. The *incognito* of the Master comes first, the *incognito* of the disciple is the imitation of the Master. For Bonhoeffer, “non-religious” Christianity is primarily a christological concept, our interpretation, therefore, also has to be primarily christological.

2. The Question of Continuity

One of the difficulties with applying christological principles to Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” is the question of continuity. Is it continuous or discontinuous with his earlier writings? If we begin with Bonhoeffer’s christological ideas,

⁹ Ibid, p. 279.

¹⁰ “We have lost the concept of heresy today... This is a tremendous catastrophe.” (*Christology*, p. 78.)

¹¹ Bethge says: “Without the overriding theme they [the formulae of the world come of age, non-religious interpretation, and arcane discipline] would fall apart, become stunted or superficial. As isolated intellectual phenomena they have but little to do with Bonhoeffer’s thought, but in the Christological perspective of his main theme they achieve their full and independent justification. Thus the question ‘Who are YOU today?’ involves two things: one, the fact that Bonhoeffer is concerned for the full Christological answer in continuity with the past, and two, the fact that in losing the freshness of past answers, we are concerned with the adventure of a new Christological answer.” (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 769.)

which ideas can we rely on? The ideas of *Christology* only, or the christology of *Discipleship* and the *Ethics*, as well? Where shall we put the theology of the *Ethics*? Is it a part of the earlier period of *Discipleship*? Does it belong to the “new theology” of the prison letters? Is it a transitory phase between the two? Or, is it maybe the beginning of a synthesis between his early period of *Christology* and middle period of *Discipleship*?

Clearly, there is a discontinuity between *Discipleship* and his “new theology”. Bonhoeffer himself admits the newness of his thoughts to Bethge: “You would be surprised, and perhaps even be worried, by my theological thoughts and the conclusions that they lead to.”¹² The impression Bethge gives about Bonhoeffer’s mature thoughts is that this is not simply a development of his earlier theology, but a new kind of theological enterprise:

Bonhoeffer regarded both the direction and the radical nature of his thinking as something quite new within the Confessing Church and considered that his contemporaries would be shocked by both. And, at that time, they were.¹³

The discontinuity is obvious in many respects, but the most obvious example is the shift in the nature and place of the Church. In *Life Together* and *Discipleship* the Church is the *visible* Body of Christ, occupying space in the world. This is superceded by the concept of the “disciplina arcana” and “non-religious” Christianity. There is a debate over the turning point in Bonhoeffer’s theology. “Many placed the change before the *Ethics*, others between the *Ethics* and the letters from prison of 1944... Others also regarded April 1944 as a main turning point, among them Karl Barth...”¹⁴

I would argue, however, that Bonhoeffer’s christological ideas, which are quite consistent throughout his entire authorship, are able to explain this change, and can even explain the changing focus of his christology. Bonhoeffer’s christology had an inbuilt dialectics and dynamism which can serve as the thread between Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious” Christianity and his earlier views. This thread begins with *Christology*, goes through *Life Together*, *Discipleship* and the *Ethics*, and is still there in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. “[O]ne does observe here a certain continuity.”¹⁵ (Bethge)

It follows from Bonhoeffer’s christological focus that the best approach to his “new theology” is to see it in the light of a continuity with *Christology* and the christology of *Discipleship* and the *Ethics*, rather than as a departure from his earlier thoughts on ecclesiology in *Life Together* and the second part of *Discipleship*. “Non-religious” Christianity is not a denial of the Church, it is

¹² *Letters*, p. 279.

¹³ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 762.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 763.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 760.

rather the Church (of the disciples) following the Master into a new situation. The new (“non-religious”) disciple is still the follower of Christ.

There is much more continuity between *Discipleship* and the “new theology” than is often acknowledged:

It is not altogether easy to decide the question of the turning point, if only because so many elements of continuity with the past can be traced, even with *The Cost of Discipleship*. Both the latter and *Letters and Papers from Prison* end in a remarkable way with the motif of *imitatio*. Moreover, many ideas of 1944 can be found already in the *Ethics* and letters of 1943...¹⁶

Bonhoeffer does not go against his earlier views that can be found in *Discipleship*. “I still stand by what I wrote”, said exactly at the time of writing his “new theology”. It is true in both ways. In April 1944 Bonhoeffer doesn’t reject the theology of *Discipleship* (though he sees potential dangers in them), he still thinks in terms of radical discipleship. But it is also true, that we find germs of his later views in *Discipleship*. He claims, for example, that the church must be *visible*, because the lamp must not be put under the bushel, but then he adds something that is remarkably close to his “new theology”:

Is it not plain to the simplest hearers that the cross is the very place where something extraordinary has been made visible? ... Are the rejection and the suffering of Christ, his death before the gates of the city on the hill of shame, not visible enough? Are they what is meant by ‘invisibility’? It is in this light that the good works of the disciples are meant to be seen. Men are not to see the disciples but their good works, says Jesus.¹⁷

Another similarity between *Discipleship* and the “new theology” is Bonhoeffer’s view on worldliness. Obedience to Christ means both holiness and worldliness. Since Luther’s opposition to monasticism, we can hardly find any Lutheran theologians who would not struggle with the question of the right understanding of worldliness. It is true of Bonhoeffer, as well. He saw Luther as the perfect example of “holy worldliness” and “worldly holiness”. “Luther had to leave the cloister and go back to the world, not because the world in itself was good and holy, but because even the cloister was only a part of the world.”¹⁸ In *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer dealt with the problem of how worldliness can be holy, in the *Letters* he struggled with the problem of how holiness can be worldly. The same dichotomy is present in both.

Bonhoeffer’ vision of the healthy path to “religionless” Christianity leads through *Discipleship*, just as Luther’s worldliness was different from the

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 763.

¹⁷ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 107.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 40.

worldliness of bourgeois Lutheranism in that Luther came out of the cloister! In *Discipleship* we already find the germs of a “non-religious” Christianity, a holy worldliness, and in *Letters* we still encounter memories of the price paid for the *imitatio Christi*. We could almost say that the connection between the two is the personal example of Martin Luther, but we are closer to the truth when we see in the background the dialectics of Bonhoeffer’s christology, and the “neither this, nor that” of the Chalcedonian Definition.¹⁹ “Simple negations remain. No positive pattern of thought is left to explain what happens to the God-man Jesus Christ.”²⁰ Holy worldliness is the “polyphony of life”.

Bethge argues that the strongest influences on Bonhoeffer’s prison thoughts do not come from contemporary theologians, but from his own early writings. “In 1944 Bonhoeffer would have said that he had gone back to his own early theological period, rather than to his contemporaries.”²¹ This is very important, because it confirms that the clue to Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” is an understanding of his old-old theology, especially (though not exclusively) that of *Christology*. There is a christological continuity in his writings.

3. The Incognito of the Master

The relevance of the incognito of Christ for Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious” Christianity becomes obvious when we examine three aspects of Christ’s presence in the world in Bonhoeffer’s writings: his *transcendence* as the anti-Logos, his *incarnation*, and the special situation of the *cross*. All three closely resemble Kierkegaard’s way of thinking. It is not an accident that the second sentence of Bonhoeffer’s *Christology* is already a quotation from the Danish philosopher.²² It is easy to recognise Bonhoeffer’s deep indebtedness to Kierkegaard.²³ We shall not discuss this, but even the purpose of the incognito of Christ is explained by them the same way: only the scandal caused by the incognito can make real faith possible. “There is only faith where a man so surrenders himself to the humiliated God-man as to stake his life on him, even when this seems against all sense.”²⁴

¹⁹ In one of his letters, Bonhoeffer uses the Chalcedonian Definition to explain the “polyphony of life”: loving God eternally with our whole heart, and loving the world and the things of the world with an erotic love. (*Letters*, p. 303.)

²⁰ *Christology*, p. 91.

²¹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 762.

²² “Be silent, for that is the absolute.”

²³ Even the vocabulary is largely Kierkegaard’s: existential, absolute, time and eternity, transcendence and presence, immediate and mediated, contemporaneity, incognito, scandal, stumbling, lowliness, God-Man, etc.

²⁴ *Christology*, p. 114-115.

“Christology is *the* science, because it is concerned with the Logos.”²⁵ God communicates with us through Christ. His communication through Christ is different from normal human communication, it transcends our natural way of thinking. It is the divine Logos as opposed to all human Logos:

Were this Logos our own Logos, then christology would be a matter of the Logos reflecting upon itself. But this Logos is the Logos of God, whose transcendence makes christology the crown of learning and whose coming from outside makes it a centre of scholarship. This subject remains transcendent and yet the Logos with whom we are concerned here is a person. This man is transcendent.²⁶

It is the transcendence of the person of Christ that makes communication through him indirect or mediated (a term Kierkegaard often used and which Bonhoeffer also applied to Christ and his disciples). The Logos is not part of the world. He comes from outside and refuses to be classified. It annihilates all kinds of human Logos, the Logos of God is, therefore, *anti-Logos*. It is different from all human Logos, because human Logos is immanent, divine Logos is transcendent. This is not obvious for everyone, though, due to the concealment of the divine Logos.

When someone approaches this Logos in humility and prayer, he will find a strangeness in Christ, the anti-Logos, for he will notice his transcendence, too.²⁷ Humility begins with silence, because silence is the attitude that recognises the divine revelation in the otherwise concealed phenomenon. In silence we understand that the only relevant question concerning him is “Who are you?” Christ’s transcendent nature puts the divine Logos into a new category. He becomes a puzzle, in a good sense, for the one who is ready to listen to the revelation that comes to us through the person of Christ.

There is, however, a conscious concealment in this divine Logos, the transcendent Christ, and most people never notice his true identity.²⁸ This concealment is the *incognito*. The wholly different Son of God appeared in human form and became God-man in concealment. This is the foundation of Kierkegaard’s christology, and Bonhoeffer follows in his steps. According to Kierkegaard, the *incognito* is the unrecognizableness of the anti-Logos, the

²⁵ Ibid, p. 28.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “The question ‘Who?’ expresses the strangeness and otherness of the encounter and at the same time reveals itself as the question of the very existence of the enquirer himself. He enquires about the being which is alien to his own being, about the boundaries of his own existence. Transcendence puts his own being into question. (Ibid, p. 31.)

²⁸ “The believer... sees, bound up with the *incognito*, something of the glory of God. ‘We saw his glory’ (John 1.14). But the non-believer sees nothing.” (Ibid, p. 116)

transcendent Christ.²⁹ Bonhoeffer agrees with him: "If a man wishes to be in incognito, one insults him if one says to him: I have both seen you and seen through you (Kierkegaard)".³⁰ Bonhoeffer emphasises the role of faith and Jesus' sovereign will in the recognition of Christ behind the incognito:

There is no point in the life of Jesus to which one could point and say clearly, "Jesus here was indubitably the Son of God," "Jesus here can clearly be recognized from one of his works." No, he did his work in the incognito of history, in the flesh. The incognito of the incarnation makes it doubly impossible to recognize the person from his works: 1. Jesus is man and it is an ambiguous procedure to infer the person from the work. 2. Jesus is God and it is impossible to argue directly from history to God. If this way of knowledge is excluded, there remains just one more attempt possible to gain access to Jesus Christ. This is the attempt to be in the place where the person reveals himself in his own being, without any compulsion. That is the place of prayer to Christ. Only through the self-revelation is the person of Christ, and thus his work, disclosed.³¹

The idea of transcendence has a significant role in the nature of the incognito of Christ. The incognito hides the transcendence of the divine Logos. How does it happen? It happens through complete immanence. Transcendence is not *beside* immanence, it is *in the midst of* immanence. It looks immanent under the disguise of the incognito, and, in a sense, it is really immanent. What the natural eye perceives is the lack of difference, the total identification. Christ is one of us. He is no different at all. Christ occupies place, but only in his immanent nature, not in his transcendent reality. His transcendence does not occupy further space, it is exactly the "size" of his immanent reality. Infinity (Kierkegaard's favourite word for transcendence) is within time, it is within the moment. When on earth, Christ's transcendence, his infinite nature was concealed and encapsulated by his immanence, his humanness in time and space. After Christ was glorified, his transcendence is present in the Church, that is, in the fellowship of those who listen to him in prayer.³² "[T]he Logos of God has extension in space and time in and as the

²⁹ "What is unrecognizableness? It means not to appear in one's proper role, as, for example, when a policeman appears in plain clothes. And so unrecognizableness, the absolute unrecognizableness, is this: being God, to be also an individual man. To be the individual man, or an individual man (whether it be a distinguished or a lowly man is here irrelevant), is the greatest possible, the infinitely qualitative, remove from being God, and therefore the profoundest incognito." (S. Kierkegaard: *Training in Christianity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957, p. 127.)

³⁰ *Christology*, p. 113.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 39.

³² "Jesus is the Christ present as the Crucified and Risen One. That is the first statement of christology. 'Present' is to be understood in a temporal and spatial sense, *hic et nunc*. So it is part of the definition of the person. Both come together in the concept of the church. Christ is present in the church as a person. That is the second christological definition." (*Ibid*, p. 43.)

community.”³³ Christ’s infinity is always under the disguise of the immanence of his being God-in-the-flesh, or his being the Body of Christ on earth.

This understanding of the incognito has great influence on Bonhoeffer’s later views on discipleship in the world. The main question that he raises in Tegel is whether the transcendence of Christ must be mediated through the immanence of the institution called “Church”, or whether it can be more directly present in the world through the disciples in incognito. The question has to do with *presence* and *space*. Should there be a separate space for the Church, or can the transcendent reality of Christ be present in all the space which is the world? We will return to this point when we discuss the incognito of the disciples.

INCARNATION

The basic form of Christ’s incognito is the incarnation. This is where Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer agree (despite their disagreement concerning the starting point of Christ’s humiliation, as we shall see). The foundational concealment of the transcendent Logos is his becoming man. “To be the individual man... is the greatest possible, the infinitely qualitative, remove from being God, and therefore the profoundest incognito.”³⁴ (Kierkegaard) Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that Jesus, to guard his incognito as a human being, deliberately refused to give signs in cases where unbelief asked him to perform miracles. “Had he answered the question put to him about his authority with a miracle, then it would not be true that he was wholly man as we are.” The incognito is the incarnation, and it is to be guarded. “So the nearer the revelation, the thicker the concealment must be; the more urgent the question about Christ, the more impenetrable the incognito.”³⁵

It is Jesus’ humanity that deliberately conceals his wholly other nature. His becoming man is what makes him appear in a different role than what he really is. Bonhoeffer is conscious of the danger of docetism, therefore he also emphasises that the humanity of Jesus, the incognito, was not less real than our humanity. “God becomes man, real man. While we are trying to grow out beyond our manhood, to leave the man behind us, God becomes man and we have to recognize that God wishes us men, too, to be real men.”³⁶ We must see Jesus’ humanity as something real, not just an appearance. We can avoid the docetic heresy if we see Christ’s incognito as something that hides not only his divine nature, but his entire being as the God-man. His humanity is never an

³³ Ibid, p. 60.

³⁴ *Training in Christianity*, p. 127.

³⁵ *Christology*, p. 114.

³⁶ *Ethics*, p. 71.

accident that hides his true identity, his divinity. No, his real humanity conceals his true identity as the God-man, wholly divine, wholly human.

After the docetic charge is cleared, we have to emphasise, though, that his becoming man truly served as an incognito. The identification of the Son of God with us, and the fact that this identification was real, made his divine nature, his unity as God-man, unrecognisable. When people saw Jesus, the man, they only saw Jesus, the man. He may become Jesus, the God-man, for the eyes of faith, because He is really God, but the natural eyes cannot perceive this transcendence, they only see the incognito. It is a powerful situation, a conscious attempt by Christ to hide his strength behind his weakness, and to preserve his power of choice for revealing himself to whoever he wants to.

There is another aspect of the incarnation of Christ that Bonhoeffer makes much of. Through the incarnation Jesus Christ didn't only become one with the Church, Bonhoeffer says, he became one with *humanity*: "The Church can be called the Body of Christ because in Christ's Body man is really taken up by Him, and so, too, therefore, are all mankind. The Church, then, bears the form which is in truth the proper form of all humanity."³⁷ This thought has great significance for Bonhoeffer's concept of a "non-religious" Christianity. The incarnation affirms the world, affirms humanity, affirms the entire space where the world is. The shape of the Church must take up the shape of the entire incognito, mankind.

When Jesus takes up humanity, he becomes *the centre of history*. He is a hidden centre, a centre which is not obvious, but is nevertheless real. Christ is present *in the midst of the world*: in the midst of the Church, and in the midst of the state, too. His central role is acknowledged by the Church, the state doesn't necessarily know about it. Christ becomes the meeting point between the Church and the state, He remains the centre. The relationship of Church and state can change, and it is Christ, the Lord of both, who defines and redefines their shapes and roles. There is a certain freedom in God's choice of using His "left hand" (state) and His "right hand" (Church).³⁸ There is a hidden intercourse between the role of the Church and the role of the state, and the intercourse is Christ himself, not politics. The Church experiences the entire Christ, because the Church is the Body of Christ. Since Christ is in the midst of the world, the Church, His Body, is the centre of the state. Bonhoeffer will use this hidden connection (and God's freedom of redefining the exact form of this inner connection *in and through the rule of Christ*³⁹) for his concept of "non-religious" Christianity. When the relationship of religion (Church?) and the world (state?) changes, the realisation of the centre (the place of Christ) can be

³⁷ *Ethics*, p. 83.

³⁸ *Christology*, p. 66.

³⁹ This explains the otherwise puzzling claim, that the world "has come of age by Jesus Christ". (*Letters*, p. 342.)

redefined. Christ's presence in the world is a dynamic presence, its focus may change in history.⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer's christology lacks the static nature of traditional christologies (and ecclesiologies!).

CROSS

The cross of Jesus is the logical end of his *humiliation*. It is the deliberate concealment of his power and strength, his ultimate self-giving to others. Christ's humiliation is an aspect of his incognito, but it is different from his *transcendence* in the midst of his immanent reality, and it is also different from his *incarnation*. This is one of the most important points of Bonhoeffer's teaching on the incognito of Christ. The humiliation that led to the cross is a special case of the concealment of his real identity. It is so special that in light of that even the incarnation is more a revelation than a concealment. "In the incarnation, God reveals himself without concealment. Not the Logos, the Godhead or the manhood of Christ, but the whole person of the God-man is in the humiliation."⁴¹ When Bonhoeffer says that in the incarnation God reveals himself "without concealment", he doesn't deny "the incognito of the incarnation"⁴² that he clearly assumed earlier. What he means is that the voluntary humiliation of the Incarnate One is a further measure and an outstanding example of the concealment of Christ, the incognito.

Bonhoeffer emphasises more than three times in *Christology* that Christ's humiliation did not begin with his incarnation. The correct order is not Logos-humiliation-incarnation, but Logos-incarnation-humiliation. The incarnation is not the humiliation, nor is it the beginning of humiliation. Humiliation is the humiliation of the Incarnate One, not the pre-incarnate Logos. Here Bonhoeffer departs from his guide, Kierkegaard, who considered the incarnation itself the humiliation. Kierkegaard says:

His life in its two periods... though they exhibit a certain diversity, fall *essentially* under the concept of humiliation. For it is always humiliation for God to be man, though He were Emperor of all emperors, and *essentially* He is not more

⁴⁰ "During the course of his entire life Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question: 'Who is Jesus Christ?' The formulation of this central christological question is crucial for an understanding of the thinking of the German theologian. Bonhoeffer never debated the *presence* of Jesus Christ. He sensed this presence in the manifold and varied situations in which he lived. But at different stages in his pilgrimage he wrestled with differing focal points of Christ's presence and reality. At the beginning of his academic career, for example, he developed the ecclesiological focus, finding the presence of Christ in the church, understood in terms of community. The thesis formed the basis of Bonhoeffer's repeated emphasis on the Christian life as involvement in the messianic sufferings of Christ. The theme of the presence of Christ in the church was joined at the end of his life by another, which became his legacy for subsequent theology. As his *Letters and Papers from Prison* indicates, while a captive of the Hitler regime he engaged in an intense struggle with the question of the presence of Christ in the world." (*20th-Century Theology*, p. 149-150.)

⁴¹ *Christology*, p. 110-111.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 39.

humiliated by being a poor, lowly man, mocked and (as the Scripture adds) spat upon.⁴³

The consequence of Bonhoeffer's theological position is that the suffering of Jesus (which culminated on the cross) is seen as a special case of concealment, a different kind of incognito than the incarnation. Kierkegaard's approach keeps the unity of incarnation and suffering, thus emphasising the indispensability of weakness in Christ and his followers.⁴⁴ For Kierkegaard, the concealment of being human and the concealment of suffering and weakness are essentially the same. Bonhoeffer, however, separates the two, if not in a strict chronological sense, at least logically. This separation opens the door for a special case of concealment in Christ, and for his disciples, too. Whether Bonhoeffer is right or not in his christological position, the result is the creation of alternative situations for the disciples: a situation with the concealment of the incarnation only, and another situation with the special concealment of the cross. This latter one is another christological foundation for the "new discipleship" in a world "come of age".

Jesus Christ was never really accepted by the world, but the rejection reached its climax on the cross. That is the situation when Christ is completely pushed out of the world. Is this a total defeat? No. The exclusion of Christ on the cross created the possibility of purification. When Christ is excluded, the world remained without Christ. This is sin, but this totality of the godlessness of the world is nevertheless pregnant with the possibility of salvation. This pushing out of Jesus Christ from the world results in the salvation of the world. The cross is, therefore, the most glorious aspect of the incognito of Christ. When he is the weakest, then he is the strongest. When he is pushed out of the world of man and history, then he reappears in the midst of it, victoriously.

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.⁴⁵

This point is extremely significant for Bonhoeffer's new discipleship in a world "come of age".

⁴³ *Training in Christianity*, p. 43. Although Bonhoeffer tells us that his view is the Lutheran one, and the other view is the Reformed position, this cannot be an absolute claim, given Kierkegaard's Lutheran background.

⁴⁴ Could this be a reason why Bonhoeffer criticises Kierkegaard in one of his prison letters? "Now, is it right to set the Old Testament blessing against the cross? That is what Kierkegaard did." (*Letters*, p. 374)

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 360-361.

4. The Incognito of the Disciple

“When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all the bonds of legalism.”⁴⁶ Discipleship is never a pre-meditated, objectified ideal, it is always a personal response to the call of the living Jesus Christ. “An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system... are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ.”⁴⁷ We have only one valid reaction to his presence: to be where He is. “Because the Son of God became Man, because he is the Mediator, for that reason alone the only true relation we can have with him is to follow him.”⁴⁸

Christian discipleship must have a christological basis in that the disciple has to become what his Master is. The first and foremost question of the disciple, therefore, is: Who are you, Lord, and where is your presence now? “Bonhoeffer’s theme involves a setting out in order to discover the presence of Christ in the world of today: not a discovery of the modern world, but discovering HIM in this world.”⁴⁹ (Bethge)

Bonhoeffer’s concept of a “non-religious” Christianity has to do with the transcendence, the incarnation, and the humiliation of Christ. The attentive disciple finds his Master under the incognito of immanence, humanity, and complete powerlessness. A “non-religious” interpretation of Christianity is the result of the *imitatio Christi*. The “new disciple” takes up the form of the Master. As a result of his *imitatio*, he also puts on the incognito.

TRANSCENDENCE

The disguise of transcendence is immanence. Bonhoeffer is very passionate about this. Christ is present in the world through his “being there for others”. He is not far away, he is as close to people as anyone could be. “His ‘being there for others’ is the experience of transcendence.”⁵⁰ When the disciple looks for Jesus, he does not find him in the extraordinary achievements of miracles and super-holiness, but in the ordinary situations of life, where he is there for others.

The transcendental is not infinite and unattainable tasks, but the neighbour who is within reach in any given situation. God in human form – not, as in oriental religions, in animal form, monstrous, chaotic, remote, and terrifying, nor in the

⁴⁶ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 769.

⁵⁰ *Letters*, p. 381.

conceptual forms of the absolute, metaphysical, infinite, etc., nor yet in the Greek divine-human form of 'man in himself', but 'the man for others', and therefore the Crucified, the man who lives out of the transcendent.⁵¹

The incognito is the unrecognisable difference, because it is hidden under complete immanence. The only way it becomes recognisable is its nature of being there for others. We may call this love, if love was not an abused word, a "religious" (!) word. In all other respects the transcendent remains unrecognisable. This is the way the disciple ought to live. His transcendent nature – his holiness, we might say, if holiness was not also a "religious" word – must be hidden under his immanence, his ordinary lifestyle. The only way his transcendence is allowed to become visible is his "being there for others", that is, through his love.

It is easy to misunderstand Bonhoeffer, and assume that he wanted to get rid of transcendence altogether, and accept some form of a "social gospel", or identify discipleship with philanthropy. This is not true, however. Bethge defends him from this charge:

He is not thinking in terms of 'immanence-transcendence' in order then to eliminate transcendence in favour of immanence. On the contrary, he is concerned here in particular to regain a genuine transcendence, in contrast to a new valueless metaphysics, as an 'extended world' and as a necessary prerequisite to any faith.⁵²

Immanence is, therefore, the "place" where transcendence is realised. As we saw in the case of Christ, transcendence is not somewhere *beside* immanence, it is right *there* where immanent reality is. This is a major concern for Bonhoeffer. God should not be a kind of "deus ex machina". God must never be proclaimed as a "God of the gaps". His transcendence is not in the unsolved mysteries of the world. No. His presence is in the ordinary, the known, the already explained reality. God is exactly where He was proclaimed by men to have become superfluous. He is at the places where He is not needed anymore. Transcendence is *in the midst of* immanence, Christ is the centre of the world. Let us not try to put God back into the gaps, make Him again a "deus ex machina", let us instead rejoice over the fact that this Greek god was expelled from reality, that the world has come of age! This is a great opportunity to see God again in the middle, in the midst of all reality, with *all* its concerns. The disciple of Christ, therefore, has to be just as ordinary and immanent as his Master is ordinary and immanent. His transcendence

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 381-382.

⁵² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 776.

must be hidden under the incognito of immanence. His connection with infinity should be totally unrecognisable – except his “being there for others”.

Bonhoeffer’s concept is not entirely new. A hundred years earlier Kierkegaard also struggled with the relationship of the disciple’s transcendence with his immanence. His solution was very similar to Bonhoeffer’s. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard described the believer as a person who knows infinity and yet lives in time, someone who is transcendent, but is unrecognisable in his immanent existence. Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, describes an imaginary encounter with a real believer, one he calls “the knight of faith”. Kierkegaard makes Johannes, a seeker, be surprised by the unexpected unrecognisableness of the believer:

Here he is. The acquaintance is made, I am introduced to him. The instant I first lay eyes on him, I set him apart at once; I jump back, clap my hands, and say half aloud: “Good Lord, is this the man, is this really the one – he looks just like a tax collector!” But this is indeed the one. I move a little closer to him, watch his slightest movement to see if it reveals a bit of heterogeneous optical telegraphy from the infinite, a glance, a facial expression, a gesture, a sadness, a smile that would betray the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite. No! I examine his figure from top to toe to see if there may not be a crack through which the infinite could peek. No! He is solid all the way through. His stance? It is vigorous, belongs entirely to finitude; no spruced-up burgher walking out to Fresberg on a Sunday afternoon treads the earth more solidly. He belongs entirely to the world; no bourgeois philistine could belong to it more.⁵³

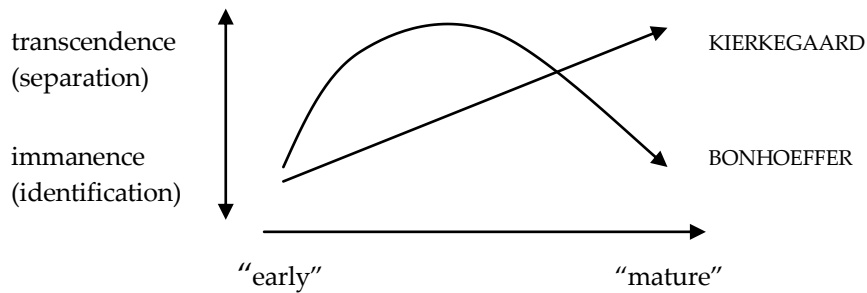
It is difficult to imagine that Bonhoeffer would not have read *Fear and Trembling*. His early theology is deeply influenced by Kierkegaard’s thinking, and the Danish philosopher is still (or again) on the horizon of his mind at the time of writing his “new theology”. He refers to Kierkegaard four times in his letters from prison, three times in a positive way, only once critically. True, Bonhoeffer rejected the individualism of existentialist philosophy. He felt a growing responsibility for the world, and wanted all Christians to act and live responsibly as “beings for others”. It is, nevertheless, an interesting fact that the development of Bonhoeffer’s thinking is so close to that of Kierkegaard.

Both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer struggled with the moral decline and false worldliness of the Lutheranism of their times. They had serious questions about the nature of true Christianity. Both of them gave deep considerations to the person of Christ, and made him the focus of their thinking. Both of them wrote challenging books on the radical nature of discipleship. Both of them,

⁵³ *The Essential Kierkegaard* /ed. Hong & Hong/, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p. 96. Johannes de Silentio further describes this knight as he does the leap of faith in each moment into the infinite, in the midst of his ordinary existence.

though generally being orthodox in their faith, rejected a solely historical view of Jesus, and advocated an existential encounter with the contemporaneous, risen Christ. And both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer vacillated between the two foci of their understanding of discipleship: the disciple's infinite separation from the world (transcendence) and the disciple's complete identification with the world (immanence).

It is interesting, however, to see the opposite directions in which Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer changed their foci. The immanence and the incognito of the disciple was the focus of the early Kierkegaard. His aesthetic writings – an incognito itself! – and his thoughts on the “knight of faith” clearly show his early swing towards immanence. His focus changed, however, and he wrote more and more about the manifest transcendence of the disciple and his radical separation from the world.⁵⁴ This tendency is most obvious in his *Training (Practice) in Christianity*, in which the idea of the incognito of Christ is dealt with extensively, but not that of the disciple. Bonhoeffer, after the early period of his authorship, did the opposite movement in the 1930s and 1940s: from the almost “Christ against culture” position of *Discipleship* to the “non-religious” disciple of the *Letters*. There is, therefore, a correlation between the “mature” Kierkegaard and the “middle” period of Bonhoeffer, and the “early” Kierkegaard and the “mature” Bonhoeffer. We can see their intellectual journeys in the following way:



Closely related to this is the question of *the space of the Church*, the community of the disciples. Bonhoeffer, no doubt, changed his mind on this subject. In *Discipleship* he argued that the Church of Jesus Christ is a visible reality, and as such, it must occupy space and time in the world. “The Body of

⁵⁴ To a question I raised in personal correspondence regarding Kierkegaard’s views on culture and society, I received the following answer from Stephen C. Evans, a well-known Kierkegaard scholar: “I don’t think *Fear and Trembling* best represents his view of society. At this time he was still largely shaped by Lutheran two kingdom views, I think. I think *Practice in Christianity* and *Two Ages* are much better. Kierkegaard gradually came to see that true discipleship cannot be content with ‘hidden inwardness’ but requires a public witness, which will usually call forth opposition and even persecution.”

Christ takes up space on earth. This is a consequence of the Incarnation.”⁵⁵ But his view (including that of the role of the Incarnation) is altered in the 1940s. The change is obvious already in the *Ethics*, where he writes the following:

If one wishes to speak, then, of the space or sphere of the Church, one must bear in mind that the confines of this space are at every moment being overrun and broken down by the testimony of the Church to Jesus Christ. And this means that all mistaken thinking in terms of spheres must be excluded, since it is deleterious to the proper understanding of the Church.⁵⁶

This is where we can see the developing of Bonhoeffer’s thinking, and hence must refute those who say that there was a sharp turning point in April 1944. The separate space (or sphere) for the Church is rejected by Bonhoeffer for a different *incarnational* model already⁵⁷ in the *Ethics*. It is not the full-blown flower yet, because Bonhoeffer still writes about a space for the Church, nevertheless he already makes sure that the space of the Church “is not there in order to try to deprive the world of a piece of territory”.⁵⁸ This change is due to a new theology of the incarnation. Bonhoeffer never proceeds without a strong christological foundation, but when the christological focus changes, his view of the Church changes, too. This is what happened in the case of the space of the Church. Bonhoeffer admits that he now uses a different paradigm:

It is hard to abandon a picture which one has grown accustomed to using for the ordering of one’s ideas and concepts. And yet we must leave behind us the picture of the two spheres, and the question now is whether we can replace it with another picture which is equally simple and obvious. We shall need above all to direct our gaze to the picture of the body of Christ Himself, who became man, was crucified and rose again. In the body of Jesus Christ God is united with humanity, the whole of humanity is accepted by God, and the world is reconciled with God. In the body of Jesus Christ God took upon himself the sin of the whole world and bore it. There is no part of the world, be it never so forlorn and never so godless, which is not accepted by God and reconciled with God in Jesus Christ. Whoever sets eyes on the body of Jesus Christ in faith can never again speak of the world as though it was lost, as though it were separated from Christ; he can never again with clerical arrogance set himself apart from the world.⁵⁹

Earlier, in the middle period of Bonhoeffer’s authorship, the focus of the incarnation of Christ was the Church, his Body. The Body of Christ was seen as a separate entity from the world, even in spatial terms. In the *Ethics* and the *Letters* the focus is altered. According to the new understanding, the

⁵⁵ *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ *Ethics*, p. 203.

⁵⁷ Assuming that these parts of the *Ethics* were written before 1944.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 202.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 205.

incarnation of Christ did not create a separate space within the world, it occupied the space which *is* the world, or its centre. In the *Ethics* he talks about the Church which, as the Body of Christ, represents the entire humanity. "So the Church is not a religious community of worshippers of Christ but is Christ Himself who has taken form among men."⁶⁰

This closely resembles the ideas of *Christology* from his early period.⁶¹ The transcendence of Christ appears in the middle of our existence, in the middle of history, and of nature. It is hidden in the incognito of immanence. The early Kierkegaard's influence, which was so significant for the ideas of *Christology*, reappear again in the developing "new theology" of the mature Bonhoeffer. An incarnational model is basic for both of them.

INCARNATION

Much depends on whether we consider the theology of the *Ethics* – at least partly – as an early development of the formation of Bonhoeffer's "new theology", or whether we put it in the category of the middle period of Bonhoeffer's writings. If the *Ethics* is a phase in the development of Bonhoeffer's Tegel theology, then the incognito of the "non-religious" disciple is partly based on an incarnational theology. The *Letters* then further develops this theology, and only the aspect of the *theologia crucis* constitutes the newness of the theology after April 1944. This seems to be the case.

We can assume that the *Ethics* contains at least germs of the "new theology". We could list several examples, but it is best if we mention one instance where Bonhoeffer himself refers to this continuity. In the very first letter in which he writes about his new thoughts, he makes a reference to two concepts: the "secret discipline" and the idea of the "penultimate":

What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the secret discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate, take on a new importance here?⁶²

The first concept (secret discipline) was at least as old for Bonhoeffer as his Finkenwalde period,⁶³ the second (ultimate-penultimate), however, was a new invention and an important element of the argumentation of the *Ethics*. According to Bethge, Bonhoeffer's first ideas usually remained intact throughout the process of further elucidation. "His first visions were always very clear-cut. Later he would substantiate further his basic theses, but

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 83.

⁶¹ *Christology*, p. 63-66.

⁶² *Letters*, p. 281.

⁶³ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 784.

without smoothing away their sharp edges.”⁶⁴ This means that the idea of the “secret discipline” and the concept of the “penultimate” most likely remained the focal points of his “new theology”. In that case the importance of the *Ethics* in the development of his thinking is confirmed by Bonhoeffer himself.

The incognito of the disciple is the essence of the “non-religious” interpretation (though “incognito” is not the word Bonhoeffer chose this time). In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer is turning back to the early period of his *Christology*, where the idea of the incognito is so significant. There is a smooth shift from the radical disciple of *Discipleship* to the worldly disciple of the *Letters*. The smoothness of this shift is provided by the theology of the *Ethics*. In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer’s focus turns from the Church to the world. He begins to place the disciple in the world in a way that the disciple would affirm it rather than deny it. The idea of the incognito comes to the forefront.

Bonhoeffer feels his path ahead, but the wording is not yet the wording of the *Letters*. This phase of his thinking resembles the most the early Kierkegaard. The Kierkegaard of *Fear and Trembling* and the Bonhoeffer of the *Ethics* both advocate a strong theology of the incarnation, where the transcendent is within the immanent. There is a slight change, however, in Bonhoeffer’s theology after April 1944. Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith” is essentially a picture of a theology of incarnation, whereas Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious” Christian from the second year of Tegel is mainly a *theologia crucis*. This does not mean that the *theologia crucis* was the only christological foundation for the “non-religious” interpretation. What it means is that the focus slightly shifted from the incarnational model of the *Ethics* to the *theologia crucis* of the *Letters*.

The incarnation as an incognito is, nevertheless, an important concept, not least because this shows how the mind of Bonhoeffer proceeded in these crucial years. Moreover, there are at least three issues with regard to the incognito of the incarnation that can be found both in the *Ethics* and in the *Letters*. These are: a positive affirmation of the Old Testament, worldliness, and the concept of the “penultimate”. These constitute the incarnational foundation of a “non-religious” Christianity. It is exactly these three points that suggest a greater continuity in Bonhoeffer’s thinking than is often admitted.

1. *A positive affirmation of the Old Testament*. In the first letter which deals with the “new theology”, Bonhoeffer makes a reference to the Old Testament:

The transcendence of epistemological theory has nothing to do with the transcendence of God. God is beyond in the midst of our life. The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 766.

village. That is how it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament far too little in the light of the Old. How this religionless Christianity looks, what form it takes, is something that I'm thinking about a great deal, and I shall be writing to you again about it soon.⁶⁵

This means that Bonhoeffer pictured the incognito of immanence in terms of the earthiness of the Old Testament. For him, the Old Testament worldview and the incarnation had much in common. "I'm thinking about how we can reinterpret in a 'worldly' sense – in the sense of the Old Testament *and of John 1.14* – the concepts of repentance, faith, rebirth, and sanctification."⁶⁶ The Old Testament became a useful paradigm for him to describe the incognito of the incarnation.

Bonhoeffer was obviously fascinated with the Old Testament while he was in prison:

My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament, and in recent months I have been reading the Old Testament much more than the New. It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and the new world...⁶⁷

He even planned to write something on the importance of the Old Testament's appreciation of the good things of the earth.⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer comes back to his celebration of the Old Testament times and time again in his letters to Bethge. It would be a misconception, however, to posit that this was something radically new for Bonhoeffer. It is true that the approach of *Discipleship* contained elements of the Lutheran antithesis between the Old Testament law and the faith of Jesus Christ, but a positive view of the Old Testament does pervade Bonhoeffer's entire authorship. It is definitely present in *Christology*, *Creation and Fall*, *Life Together*, his booklet on the Psalms, and especially the *Ethics*. What was it in the Old Testament that slowly fed his thinking on Christian worldliness?

One is obviously the Old Testament's affirmation of wholeness and bodily life. This is a major theme in the *Ethics*, and we can find it in the *Letters*, too. The Bible "is always concerned with *anthrōpos teleios*, the *whole man*".⁶⁹ In the Old Testament, Bonhoeffer argues, even the concept of redemption is a this-worldly concept. "Does the question of saving one's soul appear in the Old

⁶⁵ *Letters*, p. 282.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 286-287. (Emphasis mine.)

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 157.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 181.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 346.

Testament at all?"⁷⁰ The biblical view of salvation feeds on the Old Testament's emphasis on the body and wholeness. This is what distinguishes the Christian hope of the Kingdom from all mythological hopes:

The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way which is even more sharply defined than it is in the Old Testament.⁷¹

Bonhoeffer was totally convinced that Christianity departed from the healthy teachings of the Old Testament, and thus was rightly criticised by people like Nietzsche, when it rejected the enjoyment of the goods of life. Bonhoeffer could not accept the separation between *uti* and *frui*, as was the custom since St. Augustine. "Eating and drinking do not merely serve the purpose of keeping the body in good health, but they afford natural joy in bodily living."⁷² The incognito of the incarnation must not be an appearance of being in the world, rather, it must be even more this-worldly than the mistaken worldliness of the world. Only the Old Testament can keep us from the dangers of a docetic Christianity, and, as a result, from a frivolous, superficially interpreted "friendship-evangelism", as well.

This is the second point where the importance of the Old Testament is seen in Bonhoeffer's vision. The Old Testament naturally opposes all kinds of Docetism. "The docetic heresy is the typical heresy of Greek thought. It is pagan thought *par excellence*. It has one opponent: Jewish thought."⁷³ A healthy dose of the Old Testament worldview can make us, Christians, real human beings. But it also has the advantage of not communicating or expecting a preconceived image about us, and therefore keeps the incognito intact. This is very important for the concept of the "non-religious" Christian. The world should not have an idea first, of who Christ (and the disciple) is in his transcendence, the world should rather encounter him first in the everyday situations of life, as a man "being there for others". Of course, Jewish thought always faced the other danger, that of Ebionitism. Ebionitism begins *and ends* with the earthly. Bonhoeffer had to deal with that problem, and it seems that his solution was the concept of the "secret discipline", a concept we shall examine in connection with the cross.

2. *Worldliness*. The second issue concerning the incarnational foundation of Bonhoeffer's "non-religious" interpretation of Christianity is the idea of *worldliness*. We touched on this in connection with the Old Testament, but it is such a significant concept in both the *Ethics* and the *Letters* that it is worth

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 286.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 337.

⁷² *Ethics*, p. 158.

⁷³ *Christology*, p. 79.

discussing it separately. In March 1944 Bonhoeffer was thinking about certain thirteenth-century figures and their achievements, and made the following remark to Bethge: "I've recently been studying the mature 'worldliness' of the thirteenth century... This worldliness is not 'emancipated', but 'Christian', even if it is anti-clerical."⁷⁴ It looks that Bonhoeffer's mind was already occupied by thoughts on "Christian worldliness". Two months later he wrote to Bethge: "I'm thinking about how we can interpret in a 'worldly' sense... the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, rebirth, and sanctification."⁷⁵

The fact is that Bonhoeffer had been thinking about worldliness throughout his entire authorship. We should not be surprised by this, since he himself did not come from an explicitly Christian family. Moreover, the question is, in a sense, an inbuilt paradox in Lutheranism. Worldliness was a major theme for him in *Discipleship*, especially in connection with the widespread Lutheran misconception about Luther's "secular calling". With a different focus, it is an important theme of the *Ethics*, too. In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer explores the consequences of a christology in which Christ is Lord of the world. And the concept of worldliness is in his mind in Tegel, now, when he writes to Bethge:

During the last year or so I've come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a man, as Jesus was a man – in contrast, shall we say, to John the Baptist. I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection. I think Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense.⁷⁶

It is clear that Bonhoeffer viewed "Christian worldliness" as the imitation of the incarnation of Christ. It has to do with John 1:14, "The Word became flesh."⁷⁷ Our worldliness should not be more holy, and it should not be less holy, either. Jesus became *man*, we should not try to become more than human beings, either. It is the *sinless* Jesus who became man, therefore, we should hold our humanity with the same purity, discipline and sense of eternity as he did. Again, it is the *imitatio Christi*, in this case the imitation of the incognito of the Word-made-flesh.

By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw

⁷⁴ *Letters*, p. 229.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 287.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 369.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 286.

ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane.⁷⁸

3. *The concept of the “penultimate”*. The third issue that concerns the Bonhoeffer of the *Ethics* and the Bonhoeffer of the *Letters* is the concept of the “penultimate”. As I mentioned before, this is one of the two earlier concept that Bonhoeffer himself connected with his “new theology”. “Does the secret discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate, take on a new importance here?”⁷⁹ The suggestion Bonhoeffer probably refers to is the letter of 5 December 1943. In that letter we find another proof of the continuity in his theological development, and also an early example of the vision of April 1944. Talking about his new discovery of the Old Testament, he writes the following to Bethge:

In my opinion it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament. We have already talked about this several times, and every day confirms my opinion. One cannot and must not speak the last word before the last but one. We live in the last but one and believe the last, don't we? Lutherans (so-called!) and pietists would shudder at the thought, but it is true all the same. In *The Cost of Discipleship* (ch.1) I just hinted at this, but did not follow it up; I must do so later. But the logical conclusions are far-reaching, e.g. for the problem of Catholicism, for the concept of the ministry, for the use of the Bible, etc., and above all for ethics.⁸⁰

In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer did “follow up” the theme of the “penultimate”, and the “non-religious” interpretation of Christianity is seemingly one further step in drawing the “logical conclusions” of the concept. The idea of the “penultimate” is a very important building element of the “non-religious” interpretation. What is this concept?

The “last word” is the word of the forgiving God through which He justifies the existence of the sinner and draws him into the reality of eternal life. The “ultimate” is therefore that which is yet a promise, but a promise that encompasses the totality of life. “The whole length and breadth of human life is here compressed into a single instant, a single point.”⁸¹ This is experienced by grace alone, through faith alone. The “last word” is the final word, even in a temporal sense. Everything else precedes this word:

It is always preceded by something penultimate, some action, suffering, movement, volition, defeat, uprising, entreaty or hope, that is to say, in a quite

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 370.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 281.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 157.

⁸¹ *Ethics*, p. 120.

genuine sense by a span of time, at the end of which it stands... The penultimate... remains, even though the ultimate entirely annuls and invalidates it.⁸²

The “penultimate” is, therefore, everything before the final, justifying word of God. Bonhoeffer argues, that no one is able to extend the ultimate in time before eternity is realised in the Kingdom of God. We have to live in the “penultimate”. This raises important questions for historical Christianity. It is worth quoting Bonhoeffer at length, here, for the concept of the “penultimate” is his most original incarnational model for a “non-religious” Christianity.

We are asking... about the penultimate in the lives of Christians. We are asking whether to deny it is pious self-deception, or whether to take it seriously in its own way is to incur guilt. This means that we are asking also whether the word, the gospel, can be extended in time, whether it can be spoken at any time in the same way, or whether here, too, there is a difference between the ultimate and the penultimate. So that this may become quite clear, let us ask why it is that precisely in thoroughly grave situations, for instance when I am with someone who suffered a bereavement, I often decide to adopt a ‘penultimate’ attitude, particularly when I am dealing with Christians, remaining silent as a sign that I share in the bereaved man’s helplessness in the face of such a grievous event, and not speaking the biblical words of comfort which are, in fact, known to me and available to me. Why am I often unable to open my mouth, when I ought to give expression to the ultimate? And why, instead, do I decide on an expression of thoroughly penultimate human solidarity? Is it from fear of men? Or is there some good positive reason for such an attitude, namely, that my knowledge of the word, my having it at my finger-tips, in other words my being, so to speak, spiritually master of the situation, bears only the appearance of the ultimate, but is in reality itself something entirely penultimate? Does one not in some cases, by remaining deliberately in the penultimate, perhaps point all the more genuinely to the ultimate, which God will speak in His own time (though even then through a human mouth)?⁸³

According to Bonhoeffer, there are three possible solutions to these questions. The first one is the *radical* solution, which takes the “ultimate” seriously, but despises the “penultimate”. The second one is the *compromise* solution, which hates the “ultimate” and retains the “penultimate” in its own rights. Neither of these solutions are faithful to the call of Jesus Christ. The only attitude that is in harmony with the will of God is the third one, which keeps the “ultimate” and the “penultimate” in unity in Jesus Christ. “In Him alone lies the solution for the problem of the relation between the ultimate and the penultimate.”⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid, p. 124-125.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 125-126.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 130.

“Non-religious” Christianity is a faith lived out in the incognito of the “penultimate”. The “last word” is not said in certain situations in order to keep it from profanation. This is an early verbalisation of the “disciplina arcana” of the prison letters. “Non-religious” Christianity is the acceptance of the “penultimate”. Not for the sake of compromise, as was the case in the bourgeois ethics of German (and Danish) Lutheranism, but for the sake of following Christ, who also lived in the “penultimate” and who died and rose to save it. Living in the “penultimate” without guilt, or maybe even taking on guilt for others, is to follow Christ. This is still the theology of the *Ethics*, a theology based on the incarnation, but it already contains the important elements of Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” of 1944. There is only one aspect of the “new theology” that is missing from the *Ethics*, the special situation of the humiliation of Christ, the cross.

CROSS

One could make an argument that not even the aspect of the *theologia crucis* is new in the period after April 1944, since in the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer warned against establishing a separate theology of the incarnation and a separate theology of the cross.⁸⁵ This he wrote in connection with the “penultimate”, which becomes an important concept for his partly crucicentric “non-religious” interpretation.⁸⁶

There are three main objections to this argument: 1. In the *Ethics*, the reference to the cross of Christ has nothing to do with the disciples’ incognito, it is simply about the judgement of the “penultimate”, and the mercy for that “penultimate” which “bows before the judgement”. In other words, it is about the traditional understanding of the cross of Christ: its atoning effect on those who believe; 2. There is no reference in the *Ethics* to a historical application of a theology of the cross. But the concept of the “world come of age” is essential to the *theologia crucis* of the “new theology”; 3. Bonhoeffer himself felt that there was something new and radical in his thinking after the first year he spent in Tegel.

The more probable scenario is that Bonhoeffer did slightly change his emphasis from the incarnational model of the incognito to another foundation based on a theology of the cross. The reason for this shift could be that *he wanted to find a more special case of christology for a special period of history, a world “come of age”*. Bonhoeffer’s historical interest is obvious at the time of envisioning a “non-religious” Christianity. The list of the books that he read at the time clearly proves this. He read extensively about history: he read Harnack’s

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 131.

⁸⁶ *Letters*, p. 281.

History of the Prussian Academy, Burckhardt's *Renaissance*, Dilthey's *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation* ("Dilthey is interesting me very much"⁸⁷, I'm now feeling particularly the need of a good working knowledge of Dilthey"⁸⁸), he requested from his parents Ortega y Gasset's *The Nature of Historical Crisis* and *History as a System* (Bethge implies that he received and read them)⁸⁹, and W.F. Otto's *The Gods of Greece*.

It is especially interesting that he also felt a need to study the history and philosophy of physics. Already in the summer of 1943 he received a collection of articles on modern physics and natural philosophy from his brother, Karl-Friedrich.⁹⁰ In February 1944 Bonhoeffer wrote to Bethge: "It's a matter of great regret to me that I'm so ignorant of the natural sciences, but it's a gap that cannot be filled."⁹¹ He clearly felt that the development of modern science had to do with his "new theology". Despite their major differences with regard to orthodoxy, this is where he felt Bultmann was a kindred spirit to him.

Sometime in the spring, Bonhoeffer started to study C.F. von Weizsacker's *The World-View of Physics*. On 24 May 1944 he wrote to Bethge: "I'm now reading with great interest Weizsacker's book about the 'world-view of physics', and I hope to learn a great deal from it for my own work."⁹² This book proved to be immensely influential in the shaping of his "new theology". It is so significant, that one is almost tempted to believe that at this point science and history had priority over christology in Bonhoeffer's thinking. He did not try to hide the fact that at the time he had again a greater appreciation of liberal theology,⁹³ and this obviously meant a greater appreciation of scientific knowledge, as well. But Bonhoeffer did not want to go back to pre-Barthian liberal theology, thus he needed a christological foundation for his new discoveries in the realm of science. What were these discoveries? On 29 May Bonhoeffer refers to Weizsacker's work again:

Weizsacker's book *The World-View of Physics* is still keeping me very busy. It has again brought home to me quite clearly how wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved. That is

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 189.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 204.

⁸⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 759.

⁹⁰ *Letters*, p. 52.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 204.

⁹² Ibid, p. 308.

⁹³ "I feel obliged to tackle these questions as one who, although a 'modern' theologian, is still aware of the debt he owes to liberal theology." (Ibid, p. 378.)

true of the relationship between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the wider human problems of death, suffering, and guilt. It is now possible to find, even for these questions, human answers that take no account whatever of God. In point of fact, people deal with these questions without God (it has always been so), and it is simply not true to say that only Christianity has the answers to them. As to the idea of 'solving' problems, it may be that the Christian answers are just as unconvincing – or convincing – as any others. Here, again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁹⁴

Bonhoeffer was convinced that the times had changed so much that the old ways of Christianity were not relevant for the new situation. Scientific development "pushed out" religion from the world. It is not needed as a "solution" anymore. But, and this is the originality of Bonhoeffer's thinking, we should not regret this. This is a great opportunity to regain the centre instead of the periphery! It is ignoble to use God as a filling of the gaps, since He is Lord of all. The world finally got rid of the "God of the gaps", and thus has grown up! Accepting this new situation, Bonhoeffer was searching now for the place of Christ in this new context. He clearly felt that the times he lived in were special times in history. "I can never get away from Jeremiah 45."⁹⁵ It was time for responsible thinking. Where can a Christian start his thinking? Bonhoeffer saw the answer in the incognito of the cross.

Bethge was puzzled by Bonhoeffer's sentence: "The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ." In a letter on 3 June he raised it to Bonhoeffer: "And you ought to explain a bit more how the basis for 'God in health, power and action' lies in the revelation in Jesus Christ', what does the 'midst of life' mean?"⁹⁶ To this Bonhoeffer replied on 8 June:

You now ask so many important questions on the subjects that have been occupying me lately, that I should be happy if I could answer them myself. But it's all very much in early stages; and, as usual, I'm being led on more by an instinctive feeling for questions that will arise later than by any conclusions that I've already reached about them.⁹⁷

At that time he himself is seemingly puzzled as to how the person of Jesus Christ can be the ground for regaining the middle. What he knows is that neither the liberal, nor the orthodox answers are adequate. It is not right if the world determines Christ's place in the world, but neither is it good if we

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 311-312.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 219.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 318.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 325.

simply emphasise the absolute truth of revelation.⁹⁸ These belong to the *metaphysical* way of speaking⁹⁹ that is characteristic of “religion”. The alternative approach would be to speak *individualistically*, to place Christ in the realm of the “personal”, the “inner”, and the “private”. But this is “religion”, again, an irrelevant answer to the problem.

I therefore want to start from the premise that God shouldn't be smuggled into some last secret place, but that we should frankly recognize that the world, and people, have come of age, that we shouldn't run man down in his worldliness, but confront him with God at his strongest point, that we should give up all our clerical tricks, and not regard psychotherapy and existentialist philosophy as God's pioneers. The importunity of all these people is far too unaristocratic for the Word of God to ally itself with them. The Word of God is far removed from this revolt of mistrust, this revolt from below. On the contrary, it reigns.¹⁰⁰

But how does the Logos reign? When religion is pushed out of the world as a metaphysical interpretation, when it becomes unacceptable as an individualistic escape, how can the Word of God still be victorious? The answer comes from a letter written on 16 July:

I wrote to you before about the various emergency exists that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the *salto mortale* back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty... There is no such way – at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matt. 18,3, i.e. through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty.¹⁰¹

Bonhoeffer makes sure at the outset that he will not attempt to fight on previously lost grounds. Christ must be victorious in His own way, on a ground where even Satan is defeated. This is the ground of Calvary. Bonhoeffer continues his argument:

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming to age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. *God lets himself be pushed out of the world on the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only*

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 327-328.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 286.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 346.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 360.

way, in which he is with us and helps us. [Emphasis mine.] Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.¹⁰²

Bonhoeffer's aim is to find a christological answer which is free of the metaphysical and individualistic approach of "religion". The metaphysical approach is either a lost battle or a blind positivism of revelation. The individualistic approach is ignorant of the Bible's emphasis on the "wholeness" of man. What is needed is a christological foundation for a "non-religious" interpretation. Bonhoeffer's christological solution is the "weakness and suffering" of God in the cross of Christ.

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our 'secular interpretation'.¹⁰³

All "metaphysical-religious" interpretations try to win the battle through the power of God. They attempt to push the boundaries back and gain more and more territory for God. On the other hand, all "individualistic-religious" interpretations give up the battle and escape into the private sphere. It is only a "non-religious" interpretation that attacks the world from an unexpected direction: the powerlessness of God. The "non-religious" Christian is taken up into the "messianic sufferings of God in Jesus Christ".¹⁰⁴

But what does this life look like, this participation in the powerlessness of God in the world? I will write about that next time, I hope. Just one more point for today. When we speak of God in a 'non-religious' way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.¹⁰⁵

Why is the world "come of age" closer to God? Because the cross is followed by the resurrection! The powerlessness of God is full of the mysteries of the power of God. By their powerlessness the disciples simply practice a "disciplina arcana". Their aim is to guard the power of God, manifested in his

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 360-361.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 361.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 362.

death as the Lamb of God, from profanation. The weakness of the anti-Logos in the incognito of suffering is only a concealment of his power. The disciples partake in the messianic sufferings with joy in their hearts, because they firmly believe in the resurrection. They practise a “secret discipline”, they are silent about religious things, in order to preserve the nobility of King Jesus. As Jesus remained silent before his accusers, so is the “new disciple” silent. Both Jesus and the “new disciple” know that Easter will surely come. But they keep their secret. They are not interested in gaining a little more territory. They want to gain the whole world. And they know that only the meek will inherit the earth.

Bonhoeffer could use the cross of Christ as a special case of incognito because he had opened up this possibility by separating the *incarnation* of Christ from the *humiliation* of Christ. As we saw it in connection with the incognito of the Master, humiliation was a special incognito, an added measure of concealment. The followers of Christ always had an incognito, a concealment coming from their immanence, and their becoming men for others. But there is a special, an additional kind of incognito, the powerlessness of messianic suffering, for the special times of history, the times when the world has come of age. This is the novelty of Bonhoeffer’s thinking after April 1944. This novelty, however, had a christological foundation in his own early thinking, the theology of his notes collected in *Christology*.

5. Problems, Inconsistencies, and Pastoral Concerns

So far I have tried to demonstrate the christological unity of Bonhoeffer’s thinking. Although there are changes in the focus of his theology, it is, nevertheless, consistent with the nature of his christology. Despite the changing foci and emphases, there is an inner coherence in Bonhoeffer’s entire authorship. This is true even of the “new theology” he began to construct in 1944. I argued that the idea of the incognito is the concept that summarises the three christological aspects of Bonhoeffer’s “non-religious” interpretation: transcendence, incarnation, and the cross. I pointed out that, in this respect, Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by the other Lutheran thinker, Soren Kierkegaard. The idea of the incognito was dealt with first in connection with the Master, then in connection with the disciples.

When I talk about unity, christological consistency, and inner coherence, I don’t mean that Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” was without problems, inconsistencies, and would not raise pastoral concerns. I would like to finish this study by pointing at some of these, without necessarily answering them. While the following list of concerns might be justified, we should not forget

that Bonhoeffer did not have time to finish what he planned to do. What we have of his Tegel period is a small collection of letters (including a quickly sketched outline of a book), not a fully (or even partly) written book. We should also remember that Bonhoeffer himself did not entirely know where his thinking would lead him. He had many questions he simply didn't know the answers for. We cannot even be sure if he would have approved the publication of his prison letters! They are premature thoughts that reveal Bonhoeffer's mind in the process of constructing a theology, but surely they are not what Bonhoeffer would have published to explain his "new theology". For these reasons, if for no other reasons, we have to be gracious in our criticism. On the other hand, simply given the worldwide influence of these undeveloped thoughts, we have to mention some of the problems that are either inherent in them or that they might raise for others.

1. *The problem of an inconsistent definition of "religion"*. Although Bonhoeffer gives us some clues, we cannot be entirely sure what he meant by "religion" at the time of his Tegel imprisonment. It seems that the word is sometimes given a negative meaning, it is referred to as "religiosity", the outward manifestation of Christianity practised by the "homo religiosus".¹⁰⁶ It can be neutral, too, referring to the outward appearance of the Christian faith, including the visible aspects of the Church: preaching, sacraments, prayer, worship, etc.¹⁰⁷ It can also refer to a certain kind of vocabulary, a "God-language", that still expresses itself as if the world was not grown-up. It is either the metaphysical stop-gap approach, or the individualistic escape. "Religion" can also be the opposite of "faith", and, therefore, something that is opposed to God. "Religion", in that sense, is the *human* Logos.

But the puzzling thing is that Bonhoeffer also talks about "religion" in a sense in which he practically identifies it with God and Christ. As "religion" is pushed out of the world, God is pushed out of the world. As human "religion" is made totally powerless, it is the "messianic suffering" of Christ.¹⁰⁸ "Religion", in that sense, is the anti-Logos, the divine Logos, which was crucified by the human Logos.¹⁰⁹ I'm not sure if Bonhoeffer's mind was clear on the issue of religion. The christological foundation for his historical insights about the place of religious interpretations in the world seems to be unstable. It is built on a manifold and self-contradictory interpretation of religion. But

¹⁰⁶ In connection with some Catholic practises, like making the sign of the cross, that Bonhoeffer took up in prison, he wrote to Bethge: "Don't be alarmed; I shall not come out of here a homo religiosus! On the contrary, my fear and distrust of 'religiosity' have become greater than ever here." (Ibid, p. 135.)

¹⁰⁷ "If religion is only a garment of Christianity – and even this garment has looked very different at different times – then what is a religionless Christianity?" (Ibid, p. 280.)

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 360-362.

¹⁰⁹ *Christology*, p. 34.

even if Bonhoeffer knew what he meant, his use of the word “religion” is at least very confusing for his readers.

2. *The problem of a historical foundation.* The change in the focus of Bonhoeffer’s theology in 1944 was due to his perception of a major change in history. Instead of a “synchronic” understanding of the place of Christ in the world, he then preferred a “diachronic” interpretation, in which the place of Christ in the world can change with the change of history. He envisioned a time in human history when “religion” and all “God-talk” would be completely pushed into the background or would even cease. A time when “God is dead” – in that sense. This historical situation (a world come of age *by Christ*) brings about the “messianic suffering” of Christ and his Church on the earth. This he meant to be a special situation when the pattern of the presence of Christ changes from incarnation to humiliation. It sounds almost like a new phase in human history, the phase of the cross (not Bonhoeffer’s expression). But there are at least three problems with this approach.

The first problem is the relativity of any historical perception and interpretation. Historians generally agree that we can only interpret historical processes when they have become history for us. Bonhoeffer attempted to be a prophet, and the test of the prophets is always history. Bonhoeffer’s ideas were based on a prophetic vision, but for that very reason, we should take them as such. Their certainty is exactly the certainty of an uninspired prophet.

The second problem is the narrowness of Bonhoeffer’s perspective. He talked about a “world come of age”, but what he really meant was the *Western* world. The impressions he gave us about the change of the world are much stronger than they are justified to be. In the last half-century we learnt a great deal about the variety of cultures and civilisations. We cannot blame Bonhoeffer for the narrowness of his perspective, but we should mention the problem that his identification of Western civilisation with the world raises.

The third problem is whether theology can ever be based on any other history beside biblical salvation-history. Can the presence of Christ in the world depend on changes in history? In connection with Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” we are not talking about a *quantitative* change in Christ’s presence, we are talking about a *qualitative* change. We can have serious doubts whether it is permissible to base a theological interpretation on a perception of recent history. It might be an evangelical objection, it is, nevertheless, a serious one.

3. *The problem of a dynamic christology.* The problem of a historical basis for theology raises another problem, the nature of Bonhoeffer’s christology. We noted earlier that Bonhoeffer’s christology was a dynamic, dialectical christology. It had one focus, the person of Jesus Christ. But in Bonhoeffer’s theology Jesus Christ is first of all the *living* Christ, not the historical Christ. He is a moving Christ, not a static Christ. He is Lord of the Sabbath. He is not

even met first as the historical Christ, because then he would remain nothing more than the historical Christ. He is met first as the eternal, living Christ, in order for us to be able to see him then both as the historical Christ and the living Christ. He is first of all the “present Christ”.¹¹⁰ This is probably where Bonhoeffer was influenced by existentialism the most, and strangely, this is also where Bonhoeffer can, on the one hand, powerfully defend orthodoxy, but, on the other hand, can be potentially very unorthodox.

This conception of christology carries with it the possibility of unexpected changes in Christ’s presence in the world. The presence of Christ can change both in a “synchronic” and in a “diachronic” way. This opens up the possibility of alternative situations in human history: times when Christ is present in the *Church*, and times when Christ is present in the *world*, times when he is present as the *Incarnate One*, and times when he is present as the *Crucified One*. If this statement sounds exaggerated, let us remember the words of Bonhoeffer’s main question in Tegel: “What is bothering me incessantly, is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, *for us today*.”

The dynamic nature of Bonhoeffer’s christology led him to a situation where Christ’s presence became less certain for him than traditional christologies would assume and evangelical piety would experience. This is not about Bonhoeffer’s relationship with Christ in his prison cell, it is more about his vulnerability in the face of history. Salvation history became a less static ground for him, and human history an overwhelming force. This gave Bonhoeffer’s question (“Who is Christ for us today?”) an infinite significance.

4. *The problem of the incognito of the Church*. In Bonhoeffer’s opinion Jesus’ incognito was a complete incognito, not even the resurrection could penetrate through it.¹¹¹ It can be a debate whether Bonhoeffer was right at this point. What is important for us now, however, is that if Christianity is essentially an *imitatio Christi*, the complete incognito of Christ has a significance for the disciples, as well. And such an incognito in the case of the disciples raises pastoral questions. What are these?

We cannot be certain that a complete incognito of the Church would not drown transcendence into an exaggerated immanence. There is a danger in trying to immerse holiness into worldliness. It can easily happen that our worldliness becomes a worldliness without holiness.¹¹² I wonder if Bonhoeffer’s insights in *Discipleship* concerning this issue could be put aside without paying a high price for it. Bonhoeffer most likely saw the dangers in the direction of his thinking, but the fact that the “Death-of-God” theology

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 43.

¹¹¹ “Even the resurrection is not a penetration of the incognito.” (Ibid, p. 116.)

¹¹² 1 John 2:15; James 4:4

could associate his name to their program shows that Bonhoeffer could have been more cautious in the articulation of his thoughts.

There was at least one safeguard, however, against a complete misunderstanding. One of Bonhoeffer's ways of talking about the incognito of the Church was the "disciplina arcana". The idea of the "secret discipline" shows that Bonhoeffer didn't think for a moment that the disciples should give up their transcendent identity. They only wait for the day when they can open their mouth again and interpret reality from a God-perspective. "They can make the sacrifice of being silent and incognito because they trust the Holy Spirit, who knows and brings on the time of the proclamation."¹¹³ (Bethge)

But I wonder, from a pastoral perspective, if a long silence would not end up in forgetting. How can his identity be preserved when the disciple is so careful to hide it? Assimilation is always a bigger danger when the words of identity are not frequently spoken. Words are important in the New Testament, and not just to preserve identity, but also to share the faith with others. Yes, the gospel is "being there for others", but the gospel is *kerygma*, as well. And the *kerygma* contains interpretations that are "non-secular", to invert Bonhoeffer's concept. Is it possible to ever give up the mandate to *preach*?

5. *The problem of a confused ecclesiology.* We simply don't know how Bonhoeffer envisaged the future shape and form of the Church. From what he wrote sometimes we deduce a situation where the communion of the saints doesn't exist anymore, where the disciples are completely dispersed in the world. At other times we deduce a different situation, a Church that goes "underground", a Church that stops her mouth in the public, but nevertheless practises religion and lives with the means of grace in secret. This is Bethge's interpretation of Bonhoeffer's vision.¹¹⁴

If this is what Bonhoeffer meant, his picture of the new Church is surprisingly close to that of Darby's Brethren. We shouldn't exaggerate it, but there are, in fact, some real similarities between Bonhoeffer's "non-religious" Christianity and the "breaking of the bread" services of the Plymouth Brethren. They live after the "failure" of the Church and religion, they are simply the brethren of Jesus Christ and each other, diligently (and often speechlessly) working in a godless world. The major difference, however, would be the boundaries of the fellowship of the brethren. The simplicity of the Brethren ecclesiology comes from a narrowing of the boundaries, whereas Bonhoeffer's aim was to open the boundaries and get rid of all spatial distinctions. But we cannot be really sure if this is what Bonhoeffer meant.

¹¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 788.

¹¹⁴ "We enter the 'sphere' of the arcane in order that there should be an end to spatial barriers. In other words, the 'ultimate' is praised with the initiates gathered together, so that in the 'penultimate' stage there can be a share in godlessness. Christ prays a cultic psalm and dies a profane death." (Ibid, p. 787.)

Pastorally, it is very confusing, and just as much as Bonhoeffer's views are exciting and challenging, they are potentially dangerous and useless. Will the loss of spatial boundaries, the reconciliation of the world in Christ, lead to an ultimate universalism? Will the penultimate completely absorb the ultimate in itself and define the people of Christ as simply those who "live for others", without the necessity of any kind of creed or profession of faith? Is this a theological justification for Bonhoeffer's inner alienation from "religious" people and his friendship with those good, responsible people who stood up against Hitler?¹¹⁵ I'm afraid we don't have the clear answers, because Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is painfully confusing.

The irony is that it is exactly because Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology was subjected to his christology that we have this problem. His greatest strength became his greatest weakness. It is foolish to ask what would have happened had Bonhoeffer survived the war and spent some years in the post-war period. I nevertheless suspect that his dialectical way of thinking would have pushed him back again to a stronger appreciation of *manifest* transcendence and the *visible* communion of the saints. At the time of his death he was close to a dead end, the extreme point of the pendulum of his mind. Was this a christological impasse? Let me finish with the words of Eberhardt Bethge, who will ever remain the best interpreter of Bonhoeffer's theology:

Bonhoeffer failed not only in terms of practical ecclesiology, i.e. in regard to the structure of the Church after 1945, but also in his theological treatise on the doctrine of the Church, with which he once began his theological career so passionately, and which ends with unsettled questions. At the end Bonhoeffer arrived at a stage that was highly critical of the Church. His ecclesiology seems entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*. His thinking had begun once ecclesologically. Then ecclesiology yielded to Christology, but then again in the period of *The Cost of Discipleship* and the church struggle it roused quite distinct connotations. Now we are in a phase where it has again been called into question by Christology. It would be wrong, however, to conclude from this situation that Bonhoeffer was not interested in ecclesiology. For him everything depends on the *theologia crucis*, but the only form in which he knows this is in its urging us towards the concrete fellowship of those who share Christ's sufferings in the world.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ "I often ask myself why a 'Christian instinct' often draws me more to the religionless people than to the religious, by which I don't in the least mean with any evangelizing intention, but, I might almost say, 'in brotherhood'." (*Letters*, p. 281.)

¹¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 791.