

### Paper 3: June 17<sup>th</sup> 2019 Afternoon: Christian Moral Action: Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explored how a Christian life could be fully expressed - a radical Christianity. He re-examined the Church and State relationship. Like Barth, he believed the Wholly Other God was revealed in Jesus who is fully human and "for us" who are social beings who need to "do" ethics in community. He believed action was based on conscience was the centre of Christian Ethics. Christian Ethics is about more than love.

Bonhoeffer lost his brother in WW1. He studied theology, lecturing in Berlin. In 1930, he visited the US and was inspired by social responsibility of theologians and vibrant Christianity of the black churches without racial or geographical boundaries. When, on 30th Jan 1933 Hitler came to power, on 1st Feb, *Bonhoeffer's radio broadcast questioned Hitler – people were giving earthly leader power and creating misleader and idol.*

In 1934 he set Up **The Confessing Church** with Martin Niemöller. This reacted to the Nazified Christians (German Christians in German Evangelical Church) with their Aryan Paragraph (1934) to remove non-Aryan clergy. CC adopted **The Barmen Declaration (written by Karl Barth)** which stated the Church's only duty was to its leader, Jesus. *DB came to think CC/Barmen should do more for others, be based more on action and state disobedience and did not take strong enough stand against saying all church leaders swear oath to Hitler. Bonhoeffer proposed ecumenical theology- Church with no political, racial or national boundaries.*

In 1935, he illegally trained ministers at Finkenwalde when the Nazis had come to control church leaders through a Nazi Bishop. *Finkenwalde showed the meaning of community, people were disciplined in body and mind, they prayed and meditated, read and discussed the Bible and focussed on action.* The 1937 Himmler Decree made Finkenwalde illegal and it was closed. In November 1938, on the Night Of Broken Glass, Synagogues / businesses destroyed. Jews murdered. **Bonhoeffer stood for Jews in "The Church and the Jewish Question."** He collected large sums of money for Jews. Talks with US Jewish leader.

In 1939, Bonhoeffer visited US to avoid Hitler's Army. *He returned to join resistance and overthrow Nazism. Said it was a world "of terrible alternatives."* Prayed for defeat of Germany. *Moved away from "secular pacifism" -not realistic about peace/ justice and no focus on divine peace. Christians must be prophets and question power.* With his brother in law, was double agent, helped the Jews escape and got involved in 1944 Hitler Bomb Plot. 1943 Arrested. 1945 Death.

**"Christianity and ethics have nothing to do with each other" said Bonhoeffer. All ethics is about discovering the will of God discovered in the moment of action.** God is revealed in Jesus and in the Bible people act in response. God's leadership is before the state. **Human ethics can be dangerously based on ideology and human ideas to justify power. Ethics needs re-thought theologically.** Christian Ethics not based on personal ambition but on single-mindedly doing the will of God through obedience to "the man for others" Jesus (leaving our old life, like the first disciples) clear "at the moment of action." Jesus about action not belief. **A surrender prompted by conscience which experiences disunity with self/ society. God gives liberating freedom.** Authentic Christianity is following Christ, the Bible and having Faith. Christian action is love only found in God's revelation through Jesus. *This challenges injustice. But we are sinful, our actions uncertain. Act out of faith in hope and despair.*

**Politics:** *“Give the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12, Jesus asked about tax). “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” ( St. Paul, Romans 13).* Martin Luther wrote of obedience to **The Two Kingdoms - Spiritual Kingdom of Christ (governed by the Church) and the Political kingdom (governed by the state).** *But the state can become too powerful, self-important, subordinating justice. It would never reflect God’s wishes fully as it was run by flawed humans. God not the state has ultimate power. Duty to God first. Church separate to countries. The Church keeps the State in check following God’s will.* Christians have a duty to disobey (civil disobedience) when State puts “reasonable people in unreasonable situations.” Killing was wrong (not morally justifiable) but killing Hitler (tyrannicide) was the only option because Hitler was the anti-Christ. *Bonhoeffer called this suffering disobedience. He hoped God forgave him. We cannot be sure of right / wrong. We cannot know consequences. And acting on duty can lead to evil. Only act out of faith and hope. Bold action is faith. Duty to the state not because of the state.*

**The Church: Cannot act in isolation. We are social beings. Ethics takes meaning in community. The Church, “The Body Of Christ”, provides solidarity for others, the oppressed, a moral and spiritual community which equips people with tools for good lives.** DB returned from USA to be with his people. Christians should speak out. Follow will of God through direct action and be prophets. Jesus showed solidarity. *Christianity is the salt (gives meals flavour) and light of the world to quote Jesus in Matthew 5. It exists for others. In “The Church and The Jewish Question” Bonhoeffer thought the Church must fight discrimination of the Jews by questioning the state’s actions, helping the victims of injustice and then taking direct action “not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.”* Dismayed the Church had not raised her voice. **“The Church is her true self when she exists for humanity”, he said.** “Learning to see the great events of history from below, from those who suffer”

**Religionless Christianity:** The world had “come of age” rejecting childish, superstitious religion for rationalism. *But this has been costly and created “The Western Void.” This spiritual and religious void or gap that was open to all kinds of wrong and evil non-religious attitudes such as progress, competition, Nazism.* Bonhoeffer believed a **“Religionless Christianity”** needed without the baggage past and present. *It was time for “No rusty swords” or outdated moral attitudes. Christianity had to rethink ethics. Move forward.*

**Costly Grace:** As Barth said, **Christianity was not abstract but a grounded act of God in Jesus.** Barth had not gone far enough. *We must act in the world rather than passively receive the Law. Take up our cross and follow Jesus (law of the cross) in costly grace/love not cheap grace (the deadly enemy causing “spiritual corpses”).* Price of total obedience. Engage with Jesus’ suffering. Sacrifice. Suffer. Spiritual discipline. Grace is not won in advance. Not about *rituals and being comfortable about receiving God’s love but easily but needs to involve action/sacrifice just as God sacrificed Jesus.* Christianity is not just about forgiveness, baptism and communion but **repentance, church and confession.** Like finding hidden treasure in a field said Jesus in Matthew 13. Jesus sacrificed his life. So we do. God knows suffering. **God is weak/powerless on the cross. “Those who stand with one leg on earth stand with one leg in heaven.”**

**Bonhoeffer uses the Greek word Krisis meaning dispute and judgement.** *Because of the crisis of this world (sinfulness, disputes, waywardness and lack of belief) God reveals his crisis judgement on sin and settles dispute. Called a theology of crisis. The crisis/ dispute sinfulness overcome by God's judgement, grace and redemption through Jesus.*

### Positives

1. Bonhoeffer makes Christianity the moral and spiritual conscience of the State. 2. He is concerned with truth in politics (S. Hauerwas). Says truth can be combined with tolerance. 3. He gives a place for Church in global politics. 4. He helps and questions society. 5. He is faithful to Jesus. 6. Jesus was a revolutionary. Links with liberation theology. 7. He inspires people today particularly in standing up for the Jews. 8. There is no one moral code in post-Christian pluralistic societies. Need to be tolerant. Bonhoeffer supports this. 9. Fletcher uses Bonhoeffer's example of Mother Maria who sacrificed her life to save a Jewish girl to say that truth / morality depends on love and the situation. 10. Bonhoeffer reminds us of truth in pluralist non-judgemental society. 11. Inspires Christians suffering in life. 12. Solidarity and helping others powerful idea. As is costly grace in world today. 13. Christianity needs new start. 14. Christians must be assertive. 15. Jesus suffered and stood up for people. 16. Christians must act. 17. God and obeying Jesus is the ultimate authority. Good focus. 18. Costly grace helps people in today's materialistic society. 19. Stresses community/solidarity/standing up for justice and against injustice.

### Negatives

1. Ethics developed at a particular time/ place. 2. Only for extreme situations. 3. Unhealthy to seek out suffering. 4. How can fallen beings know God's will? 5. What if Christians differ on right action? 6. Could Christians over-react rather than calmly negotiate. 7. DB seems to need reason to navigate the issues and reason flawed too. 8. Is not Christianity about God's grace freely given rather than earned through works? 9. Jesus and Paul said obey the State. 10. Jesus was not always a revolutionary. Use criticisms of liberation theology. 11. Should Christianity get involved in politics? 12. Civil disobedience dangerous. 13. Compromises pacifism. Uses violence. Gets involved in July Bomb Plot. 14. Can we know the will of God or are we just following the will of Bonhoeffer? 15. Bonhoeffer focussed on 1 threat – today many problems. 16. Can his theology deal with life in stable liberal democracies? Need to obey Government there. 17. He did think Jews should eventually convert to Christianity. Disrespectful. 18. Not compatible with pluralist societies. 19. Does God exist? Is Jesus Son of God? 20. More needed on Resurrection. 21. Exclusivist. 22. Jesus stayed within the state not separate to it like Bonhoeffer.



### Silence

in the face of evil  
is itself evil: God will not  
hold us guiltless.

Not to speak is to speak.  
Not to act is to act.

*Dietrich  
Bonhoeffer*  
silencebeforem.com



