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## Bonhoeffer, Religion and Politics

4<sup>th</sup> International Bonhoeffer Colloquium



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Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

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## Christus in Mundo, Christus pro Mundo. Bonhoeffer's Foundations for a New Christian Paradigm

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Is there a rubric that concisely summarizes Bonhoeffer's theological work as a whole? To suggest that his theological writings can be described as a quest for authentic Christianity<sup>2</sup> points in the right direction, but is certainly not enough. For one thing, this could be misunderstood in a reductionist way as an idiosyncratic personal pilgrimage rather than a theological project intended for a wide intellectual public. For another, it does not characterize the content of "authentic Christianity"; it does not present a theological rubric, or a metaphor, that highlights both the content and the distinctiveness of this project.

The present essay is a proposal about Bonhoeffer's theological project read as a whole. By writing under the title "Christus in Mundo, Christus

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a lightly revised version of a paper read at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Bonhoeffer Colloquium in Mainz. I thank my friends Roger Johnson and H. Paul Santmire for the many years of luncheon conversations about our writings, and especially the discussion in April 2010, that stimulated the hypothesis of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See Clifford Green, "Bonhoeffer's Quest for Authentic Christianity. Beyond Fundamentalism, Nationalism, Religion and Secularism," in: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology Today. A Way Between Fundamentalism and Secularism*, ed. by John de Gruchy / Stephen Plant / Christiane Tietz. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2009, 335–353. For a transitional essay, written a month before the present one, see "Sociality, Discipleship and Worldly Theology in Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism," in: *Being Human, Becoming Human. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Social Thought*, ed. by Jens Zimmermann / Brian Gregor. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2010, 71–90.

pro Mundo,” I am arguing two points: that Bonhoeffer’s theology read as a whole reveals his attempt to articulate a new Christian paradigm for the emerging age; and that the heart of this paradigm is a vision of Christ in the world and Christ for the world. If that sounds more familiar than new, the important corollary of emphasizing the presence of Christ in this actual, social-historical world is its polemical thrust: it opposes any dualism as if there were another world or reality behind and above the actual present world, and as if Christian life meant inhabiting such a dualism.<sup>3</sup>

One presupposition of this essay is that Bonhoeffer’s theology, vigorously engaged as he was in the history of his own time, is not an epiphenomenon of his work in the church and political resistance against National Socialism. It is natural, of course, that the shorthand answer to the question: “who is Dietrich Bonhoeffer?” should be given in a narrative of resistance, conspiracy, and martyrdom. The drama of his life is compelling. Further, it is entirely appropriate that his theology should be analyzed in terms of its Christology, ecclesiology, doctrine of creation, peace ethic, and his ethic of resistance as these were articulated in the church and political conflict of the Nazi era. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer’s theology is not a mere by-product of his history.

When considering Bonhoeffer’s theology as a whole, it is essential to remember what he had accomplished before 1933. The theology of his two dissertations,<sup>4</sup> his engagement with the Sermon on the Mount beginning in 1931, his reconfiguring the relation of faith and obedience as discipleship, and his foundation for the book *Discipleship*, had all been completed by 1932, that is, during the five years before Hitler dominated the scene. One must equally remember that Bonhoeffer was a biblical theologian, that he was profoundly influenced by Luther and Barth, and that offering a theological alternative to Kant was an enduring effort of his writings from first to last. None of this can be reduced to, or deduced from, the struggle

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<sup>3</sup> I am well aware that this flies in the face of much popular Christian imagery and piety, especially as regards eschatology, a topic that cannot be discussed here. I would simply comment that Bonhoeffer’s orientation is temporal-historical, not spatial-dualistic. Bluntly put: there is no “up.”

<sup>4</sup> For *Sanctorum Communio*, see Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer. A Theology of Sociality*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, esp. ch. 2; for *Act and Being* see Michael DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation. Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

against Hitler. I do not in the least wish to abstract Bonhoeffer's thought from his life and history; that cannot be done. But I insist that his theology must be understood in its own integrity and relative autonomy, and in relation to its intrinsic sources and traditions.

The ecclesial and political struggle against National Socialism is not the sum and substance of Bonhoeffer's theology, nor was he simply articulating an alternative to what he called pseudo-Lutheranism.<sup>5</sup> That he fought against a form of Lutheranism that was captive to culture and ideology and could not oppose National Socialism radically, that is, root and branch, is obvious. But there are plenty of clues – I will quote them shortly – that frame the central theological issue as one that encompasses but also transcends his contention with decadent Lutheranism and with National Socialism. The fundamental issue is the very form of the Christian paradigm itself for contemporary Christians.

### Paradigm Shifts – two Historical Examples

Before turning to Bonhoeffer, I must illustrate what I mean by paradigm and paradigm shifts. I will draw on two Harvard scholars of the previous generation, the church historian George Hunston Williams and the New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl. Williams portrays a paradigm shift in Christianity from the fourth century to the early Middle Ages, and Stendahl a shift from the New Testament to the Lutheran Reformation. It is no accident that the paradigm shifts they describe cluster around Christology and soteriology, as these theological loci engage personal and socio-cultural issues in different historical eras.<sup>6</sup>

Williams first presents the patristic paradigm that Athanasius represents, and then documents the paradigm shift embodied in Anselm, focusing especially on their understandings of redemption, and particularly on the changing views of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (DBWE 6), e.g. 56, 224, 289, 291.

<sup>6</sup> The same sort of engagement is seen in Bonhoeffer's conjunction of the question "what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?" with the historical-cultural analysis of the "coming of age" (Mündigkeit) of the world. See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (DBWE 8), 362.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. George Hunston Williams, *Anselm: Communion and Atonement*. St. Louis:

For Williams, Athanasius (296–373) represents baptismal redemption. In his treatise on the incarnation,<sup>8</sup> Athanasius presents the triumph of Christus victor over the devil, demonic powers and death. Human beings, created ex nihilo by the power of the divine Word, were sustained in their creatureliness by the creative Word. But sin vitiated their bond to the Creator and put them in thrall to the devil, subjecting humanity to corruption in death, to the physical and spiritual entropy that regressed back to the nihil from which they had come. In the goodness and loving-kindness of God, the Word became flesh to reverse the corruption and redeem the creation. Taking a human body, Christ gave his body over to death on behalf of all, so that those who died in him through baptism would, first, be relieved of death as the consequence of sin, and second, by partaking of his resurrection in baptism, would be restored to incorruption. Christ is the Christus Victor, the Pantokrator. His cross, says Athanasius repeatedly, is “a monument of victory.”<sup>9</sup> Baptism, administered decisively at Easter, is the once-in-a-lifetime event, the pre-eminent sacrament in which the faithful receive salvation by participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. With Athanasius we are still in a world that is not yet officially Christian and “baptism remained preeminently an experiential sacrament of adult believers.”<sup>10</sup>

The Christendom of Anselm (1033–1109) in the eleventh century had changed in major ways. Now virtually everybody was Christian. For most, baptism was not the identity-changing transition from paganism, polytheism, and the rule of the devil; it was the normal childhood beginning of everyday Christian life. Now the monastic practice of penitential piety set the standard for those who aspired to a truly “religious” Christian life. Like Athanasius 700 years previously, Anselm addressed the question: Cur Deus Homo, why did God become human? In a brilliant application of Chalcedonian theology to a changed spiritual context, Anselm provided the atonement theory that informed and undergirded both the theology

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Concordia Publishing House 1960. The first version of this essay was published in *Church History* 26 (1957), 245–274.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, ed. by E.R. Hardy. Library of Christian Classics vol. 3. Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1954, 55–110. Williams notes multiple patristic “baptismal” theories of salvation and remarks that they are not mutually exclusive (see *Anselm*, 13f. note 15).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 79, 84.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

of the Catholic Mass and, later, the altar call of every Protestant revivalist preacher. Central now is what Williams calls the *Christus patiens* Christology of the medieval penitential piety,<sup>11</sup> the suffering Christ whose sacrifice is reiterated in the Mass. Since one was now born into Christendom and baptized as an infant into the church, baptism is no longer the singular, life-changing redemptive event which joins the believer to the death and resurrection of Christ. Now the eucharist is the center of Christian piety and devotion. It is the supreme “means of grace” by which Christians grew into mature faith. Day by day, nurtured by the practice of self-examination, confession, and penance,<sup>12</sup> and fed at the altar in the Mass, monks and ordinary Christians dealt with the sins of everyday life and grew in grace. Western iconography now portrayed not the victorious Pantokrator but the suffering Christ, the crucifix found in every parish church,<sup>13</sup> the sacrificial “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Williams summarizes Anselm’s agenda thus: he was a devout monk for whom “Pauline Law [i.e. Torah], patristic death, and pagan fate were experientially remote.” He had “left the Christian world to seek salvation in [...] a Benedictine monastery” whose sacramental life had evolved over a millennium so that he needed “to reformulate for his age a scholastic answer to the question of how man is saved and also from what.”<sup>14</sup> In short, he articulated a new paradigm, one that has endured among many Christians into our own time. The new paradigm, centered in a reformulated Christology and soteriology, reshaped the whole pattern and interpretation of life.

I turn now to the Reformation and Luther, which dramatizes the paradigm shift from the historical Paul to the Paul of Luther’s late medieval exegesis.

Krister Stendahl’s groundbreaking 1963 article in Pauline studies, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,”<sup>15</sup> brings us

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<sup>11</sup> For a concise comparison of baptism and eucharist as “competitive” sacraments correlated to distinct theories of atonement, see *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> By this time penance is a sacrament interposed between baptism and eucharist.

<sup>13</sup> On the transition from the regal Romanesque crucifix to the Gothic Man of Sorrows, see Williams, *Anselm*, 25, citing Richard William Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*. London: Arrow Books 1959; see the illustrations in ch. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *Anselm*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963), 199–215; also 78–96 in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1976, the edition I cite here.

closer to Bonhoeffer because it involves Luther. A classic embodiment of the introspective conscience, Luther is a late-medieval example of the penitential piety just described (though I would argue that with Luther the drama of salvation has moved its center of gravity from the sacrifice of the Mass to the Word – to sermon and Scripture). However, Luther’s paradigm shift is one that makes a great historical leap right over both Anselm and Athanasius in order – purportedly – to go straight back to Paul. Luther claims to return to the *fons et origo* and to discover in Romans the article by which the church stands or falls, justification by faith. Central to discerning Luther’s paradigm shift is Stendahl’s question: what do Paul and Luther respectively mean by “law” and “justification?” And what crucial issues in their different religious and historical-social contexts did these key terms engage?

For Paul the law is Torah, and the crucial issue is whether the gospel of Jesus the Messiah is for Jews only, or for Gentiles too, i.e. everyone. If the gospel is for Gentiles too, does that mean they must first become Jews, by circumcision and submitting to Torah, including the kosher laws? Or does faith “justify” them apart from “works of the law”? Paul’s answer, of course, is that the gospel is for Jew and Gentile alike, and that justification comes by faith in the Messiah, not by following the laws of Torah. Faith and justification, then, resolve a religious-social problem for Paul, and this issue is settled, Stendahl points out, already in the first century. Paul, he adds, was not trying to resolve a timeless human problem of the conflicted conscience; he was not addressing an intra-psychic problem of individual conscience and guilt (e.g. “the good that I would I do not, and the evil I would not is what I do”<sup>16</sup>). That is to read a post-Augustine problematic back into Paul. On the contrary, according to Stendahl, the apostle had a quite robust conscience.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Stendahl asserts – and I underline that he was a Lutheran bishop – there is a “radical difference between a Paul and a Luther.”<sup>18</sup> As Luther reports in the Preface to his Latin Writings, though he “lived as a monk without reproach,” he felt like “a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience.” Indeed, because he understood the gospel of “the righ-

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<sup>16</sup> Romans 7:19.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Stendahl, *Paul*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

teousness of God” in Romans 1:17 as the threat of God’s wrath and punishment, he hated the righteous God, was angry with God, and “raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.”<sup>19</sup> This is the problem that Luther’s paradigm addresses, what Erik Erikson calls “the hypertrophy of the negative conscience”<sup>20</sup> derived from Luther’s monastic experience of the medieval penitential piety. In this context “law” is no longer Torah but the righteous demand and judgment of God. In this context, justification by faith apart from the law is the answer to the question “How do I find a gracious God?” It is not the answer to Paul’s question about Jews, Gentiles, and the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> Luther’s reading of Paul, in the radically different spiritual and social context of the sixteenth century, created a new paradigm. It was a saving and liberating message that spoke to the spiritual crises of the age. Luther’s teaching gave rise to a theological architecture of traditional Lutheranism with four main pillars – the doctrine of law and gospel and the doctrine of two kingdoms – an architecture that continues to have personal and political traction in some quarters down to our own time.

Stendahl observes a consequence of this paradigm shift among Luther’s followers: “Especially in the Protestant tradition – and particularly among Lutherans – it is Paul’s Epistle to the Romans which holds a place of honor, supplying patterns of thought that are lifted into the position of overarching and organizing principles for the [entire] Pauline material. Paul’s presentation of justification by faith has such a role; to some this serves not only as the key to Pauline thought, but [also] as the criterion for the really true gospel as it is to be found in the whole New Testament, the whole Bible, and the long and varied history of Christian theology.”<sup>22</sup> Precisely such reductionism (along with its ethical and political correlates) is one impulse to my question about Bonhoeffer and a new Christian paradigm.

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” in: *Luther’s Works, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. by Lewis W. Spitz. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1960, 336–337.

<sup>20</sup> Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther*. New York: Norton 1962, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Stendahl, *Paul*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1f.