On Classics and Saints

The Relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Talking about the relevance of the person and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer can’t be just an academic affair. It has to be personal, it touches someone’s faith, it reflects the way you live in the concrete contexts you live in. To me, talking about the relevance of Bonhoeffer is always as much talking about myself. What I am going to say now is not more than a momentary impression of the constant conversation between on the one hand the memory and texts of one of the few protestants ‘saints’ of the 20th century – I will clarify that qualification later on - and the protestant theologian that I am, looking for some theological landmarks in the jungle of post modernity.

Bonhoeffer – a classic

Hans Georg Gadamer coined the metaphor of conversation for every hermeneutical act, every act of reading and interpreting. (Truth and Method) The moment we start to read historical texts, we enter into a conversation in which we try to bridge the gap between two horizons; we ask questions, the text answers - or doesn’t. [‘Understanding’ is a matter of asking the right questions; asking the right questions is at least a matter of being well aware of your own presuppositions, your own horizon, respecting the distance between you and your text, realizing its specific horizon, but also the way it transcends it. In the hope that, in the end, you will learn about your own questions, gain some wisdom, enrich your imagination, open up some ‘possible worlds’ (Ricoeur).]
The difference between good texts and bad texts, good and bad partners of conversation is relatively easy to make. Eventually, bad texts will leave you alone with your questions, the conversation will stop and the text will be forgotten. Good texts – Gadamer calls them classics - keep you awake, sometimes provide you with answers, but mostly just help you ask the right questions. Good texts are as good friends; sometimes they tell you just what you already thought, and you feel affirmed and comforted; another time they answer back, and you don’t like the way they do because you know they are right and you are not. Sometimes they keep silent for a long while, so that you may even stop frequenting them. But whatever may happen, in the end they won’t leave you alone. You keep returning to them, and you keep on reading.

Well, to me, Bonhoeffer’s legacy is such a good text, a ‘classic’. A constant conversation partner in my personal biography as a Dutch theologian. But – that is the thesis I would like to put forward here – a theological classic, a classic for the church as well. I think that theology and the church will do themselves an injustice if they don’t commit themselves to an active remembrance of Bonhoeffer’s legacy. That’s the reason I’m not just a Bonhoeffer reader, but also a Bonhoeffer ambassador (that’s what members of Bonhoeffer societies usually are).

‘This is theology!’

I shall tell you something about my personal conversation with Bonhoeffer. I started reading Bonhoeffer as a student in theology, in the early 1970’s. Raised in an orthodox Reformed working class family, designated to become a pastor in the Dutch reformed church. But also member of the pop generation, an admirer of Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. A democratic mass culture, built around values such as authenticity and individuality. Perhaps differently than Bonhoeffer himself imagined, but certainly a ‘world come of age’ in which people couldn’t be religious anymore, at least in the way their parents once were. The clear borderlines between church and world, orthodoxy and secular culture, began to fade out. The suffocating religious and ideological pillars in which the Dutch society was organized until then quickly fell down. As so many of my generation, I didn’t feel at ease anymore in the center of church; I preferred the margins. In theology I didn’t feel at ease anymore in doing dogmatics and biblical exegesis, I preferred philosophy and ethics.
Perhaps I can say that it was Bonhoeffer – especially his *Letters and Papers from Prison* -who saved me for theology and church. Here I tasted – it begins to look like the public confession, a conversion story now! - real life theology, made in prison, not at the study or library. Made by a young man eager for life, not by an old man longing for heaven. Future oriented, aiming at the building up of a new post war society, not clinging with desperate tenacity to tradition. An experimental theology expressing itself with alternative styles like letters and poems, not a ‘systematic’, bone dry, rounded off three volume dogmatic as those of my teachers.

I know, those characteristics do not hold. Later on I read *Sanctorum Communio* and racked my brains on *Act and Being*. I met Bonhoeffer the systematician. Later on I also learned how cautious Bonhoeffer handled with tradition; how ‘traditional’ he was and in a certain sense stayed, at least in his spirituality, until the end. But this first encounter, this fresh experience: ‘If this is theology, then that’s what I want also!’ was decisive. I think it still is.

It seems as if the letter Bonhoeffer wrote from prison in May 1944, on the occasion of the baptism of his godchild, these ‘Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge’ was also written for my entire post war generation: generally baptized as a Christian, but constantly driven back to the beginnings of their understanding, because the answers of tradition don’t fit anymore.

*Today you will be baptized a Christian.*

*All those great ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be spoken over you,*

*and the command of Jesus Christ to baptize will be carried out on you,*

*without your knowing anything about it.*

*But we are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding.*

*Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship –*
all these things are so difficult and so remote that we can hardly venture any more to speak of them.

In the traditional words and acts we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it.

Every time I want to give up theology (sometimes it happens) - every time I think: Christian faith is getting more and more irrelevant in European secular society (in fact, it happens often) my classic Bonhoeffer draws me back to theology, though it is at its margins; he keeps me in faith, though faith mostly is a synonym for promise and hope. He keeps me within the Protestant tradition of the proclamation of the powerful, creative Word of God, though I know now that proclaiming the Word means mostly in fact: waiting for the Word.

'It is not for us to prophesy the day (though that day will come) when man will once more be called so to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it.

It will be a new language, perhaps quite non-religious, but liberating and redeeming - as was Jesus' language; it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power.'

But why should my classic become yours as well? Why shouldn't Bonhoeffer stay the personal reference point, the private hero of one theologian, and become a point of reference for theology, to the church? Why a Bonhoeffer reader becomes a Bonhoeffer ambassador?

Let me sum up a few qualifications of his theology in which, in my opinion, lies some of its relevance.

Bonhoeffer's theology is practical, radical, fragmentary, and secular. Those features are not exclusive. But in this combination, they probably are. Let me say something shortly about them.
1. Bonhoeffer’s theology is practical.

Already in *Sanctorum Communio*, his early dissertation, Bonhoeffer takes leave of idealism. The philosophical system that wants to get a grip on reality by thought. Bonhoeffer rediscovers that faith is not a religious act, not an inward monologue of the thinking mind about God, not a metaphysical speculation about the foundations of world, but a living experience, a practice anterior to reflection. Life makes the theologian, not thinking, as Bonhoeffer quotes Luther in SC. In his second dissertation, *Akt und Sein*, Bonhoeffer develops the concept of faith as an *actus directus*, an direct act, unmediated by reflection, socially situated in the context of the church as communion of faith. In *Costly Discipleship* faith is called discipleship, in *Ethics* formation (*Gestaltung*). In faith your entire life is involved, not just your brains or feelings. Finally then, in *The Letters and Papers from Prison*, we read: ‘it is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in secular life. … allowing oneself to be caught into the way of Jesus, the messianic event…. ’ ‘ … The “religious act” is always something partial; “faith” is something whole, involving the whole of one’s life’. (*Testament of Freedom*, The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Revised Edition, Geoffrey B. Kelly, F. Burton Nelson (eds.), Harper SanFrancisco, New York 1995, 509, ) (Letter from July 18, 1944)

To Bonhoeffer faith is what happens to you when you open up your life for the Other, for God, for the human being next to you. Faith is a *form of life* - to say it again in a wittgensteinian way - a practice, on which theology reflects critically, but only afterwards and secondary.

I think that, though the days of idealism may far be gone now, the *temptation of theory* is still a constant trap into which theology is lured. Bonhoeffer helps us to keep out of it.

Bonhoeffer’s stress on the practice of faith is not just theoretical. We can’t read his theology without negotiating his biography. The facts of his life reflect his reflection on faith. Bonhoeffer is often presented now as a model of faith. We meet him in textbooks for religious education, together with Albert Schweitzer, or Maximilian Kolbe. I think that is rightly. But why not call this sanctity and why not tell the narrative of his life as a hagiography? Why be so reluctantly protestant? I recently read Edith Wyschogrod’s book on *Saints and Postmodernism*. She defines the saint as ‘one whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow … and pain … that afflicts other persons…’. (Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and*
Postmodernism. Revisioning Moral Philosophy, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1990, 34). In this sense I think we can call Bonhoeffer a saint. Hagiographies, Wyschogrod writes further, have a clear strategic goal: they put a moral claim on their addressees, so that they may feel themselves impelled to “make the saint’s movements” after him or her. In the same way, I think, reading Bonhoeffer’s theology should not let you unchanged.

2. Bonhoeffer’s theology is radical.

Emmanuel Levinas once said that ‘whatever one demands from a saint, one cannot demand from another.’ In this sense, what Bonhoeffer demanded from himself, he couldn’t demand it from us. His theology is a practical theology, I said, but at the same time it looks like a theology impossible to bring in practice. The alternative he presented in 1934 (‘either the Confessing Church or the Devil’); his decision in 1939 to leave the USA to go back to Germany; his readiness to undergo imprisonment and finally death – this is a life and a theology without compromises. That may cause the reader some perplexities. The scholar who never said, after having read Bonhoeffer: ‘this man must have been mad!’ didn’t read him very well, I think.

But at the same time this radicalism does not leave you alone, just as the Sermon of the Mount does not leave you alone. His theology keeps holding a moral appeal on you: what would have happened when the entire German Church and ecumenical world movement would have taken over Bonhoeffer’s uncompromising stand for the Jews in 1933? What would happen today when the entire world church would stand without compromises for the poor? The radicalism of Bonhoeffer theology is a constant reminder. A firebrand, but a healthy one. The church should be chary with calling a moral dilemma a status confessionis; but it also can miss the opportunity and be too late.

3. Bonhoeffer’s theology is fragmentary

At the end of his life, Bonhoeffer had published only a few monographs. The rest are papers and letters, written on occasion. Bonhoeffer’s theology consists of fragments. ‘Systematic theology is not his strong point,’ Karl Barth wrote, in excuse. Bonhoeffer scholars in the sixties and seventies pointed at the turbulent times and the particular circumstances in which Bonhoeffer wrote his theology. When Bonhoeffer should have been given more and more steady
lifetime he finally would have composed a theology. I don’t think so. In my opinion fragmentariness is a defining, structural and positive characteristic of his theology and not a circumstantial shortcoming. How can a theologian who starts his career in saying: ‘The god who exists, does not exist’ and ends up by asking: ‘Who Christ really is, for us today’ ever be strive after a theological system? Therefore, efforts as Ernst Feil’s *Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* - how admirable they may be – perhaps are missing the point. Methodologically, Bonhoeffer’s theology is too experiential, too contextual, to be unifiable in argumentative structures. One should not try it. ‘Reality is the sacrament of the command of God’, Bonhoeffer wrote in the early thirties. Theology can’t say anything about God without participating in the contingencies of reality. I think in this methodological decision Bonhoeffer, as a good Lutheran, took seriously the doctrine of incarnation.

4. Bonhoeffer’s theology is secular

‘Jesus calls people not to a new religion, but to life.’ It is this Nietzschean ‘loyalty to earth’, a keynote to hear in Bonhoeffer’s entire work, but most clearly pronounced in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, that makes it relevant to our modern and postmodern times. Bonhoeffer breaks with the Platonic two world metaphysics, that profoundly pervaded the history of western Christendom, in shifting the center of religion to ordinary, worldly life. ‘The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but simply a human, as Jesus was human’. (July 21, 1944) I think Bonhoeffer’s effort to develop a non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts is a courageous attempt to work out a paradoxical element in the Christian tradition: the Christian religion, based on the message that the Word became flesh, God becomes human, in fact is signing its own death sentence as religion by this central doctrine. For it puts upside down the ‘upward’ direction of religion. Normally, religion locates the transcendent in heaven, the divine in the sacred, real life in afterlife; Christianity locates God in the immanent, and refers the believer back to earth. This is more than a shift in accent; when we look at the history of religion, it’s a revolution. One can say in a paradoxical way - with the philosopher Marcel Gauchet (*The Disenchantment of the world*) - that Christianity is ‘the religion that puts an end to religion’. So Bonhoeffer didn’t invent the religionlessnes of Christian religion. Jesus did it. As Luther once did at the beginning of modernity, Bonhoeffer only pushed this religious revolution forward, under late
modern, 20th century conditions, by thinking through its consequences.

The temptation of Platonism is a constant one, even in our secularized world. Many Christians keep believing in a second reality, a double celestial world behind ours. Keep believing in a God that rules the universe from there. But more and more people, non-believers and dedicated followers of Jesus Christ, find this heaven empty, this God an illusion. I think Bonhoeffer was one of the first theologians who started to think through this ‘death of God’ experience and discovered anew Christian faith as a religion of life.

His thoughts were visionary, intuitive, his this-worldly theology rested a torso.

But that’s what classics do: they don’t give you the answers you have to find yourself. They provide you with the some good questions. "What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today", he writes as a running start to his theological explorations, in that famous letter of April 30, 1944. Perhaps we already make progress in theology by constantly re-asking that very same question.