

EDITORIAL

Frank Hirth: A Newsletter for the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Centre London (DBCL).

Hello and welcome! This is the first of an upcoming series of newsletters from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Centre London. For those who are not familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he was a German theologian and writer of the 20th century (4 February 1906 – 9 April 1945), who actively opposed the Nazi regime with an attitude one could call: "in prayer and righteous action". He was arrested in 1943 by the Gestapo and, upon direct command by Hitler, executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, three weeks before the end of WWII.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent nearly two years of his life in London, from 1933 until 1935, where he acted as pastor of two German-speaking Protestant churches, the German Evangelical Church in Sydenham and the German Reformed Church of St Paul's, Whitechapel. The church in Sydenham is now called the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Church; it hosts the DBCL and aims to stimulate participation of those interested in Bonhoeffer in a variety of fields. It serves academic research as well as church-related activities both in the United Kingdom and on an international level.

The life and work of Bonhoeffer have received global attention in both the Christian churches and in universities. Among other objectives, the DBCL aims to provide opportunities for research, prayer and exchange for people worldwide interested in this martyr of the 20th century. To find out more about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the DBCL, visit our webpage: dbcl.jimdo.com

On the DBCL webpage, you can also find an electronic copy of this and future newsletters. We aim to publish at least one issue per year. The newsletter will provide a discussion forum around Dietrich Bonhoeffer and activities of the DBCL, which will cover various shapes and forms, including reprints of lectures given at the annual Bonhoeffer Day (note the upcoming 4th Bonhoeffer Day on 31st January, 2015 - see last page), book reviews, essays and comments, as well as announcements of the Centre and the Bonhoeffer Church. We are happy to receive unsolicited contributions, as well as announcements related to Bonhoeffer. To get in touch, contact:

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2014 BONHOEFFER DAY LECTURE

Jacob Phillips: *Building Community in Divided London*. Lecture presented at the 2nd annual Bonhoeffer Day, February 1st, 2014

Introduction. As has been mentioned, I am doing a PhD on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, and I'm a resident of London, having lived and worked here for just under 20-years.

In this talk, I'm not going to speak primarily as a trainee Bonhoeffer scholar, but as a Londoner (albeit of the adopted variety). I want to speak as someone who has lived and worked in this city, and witnessed the divisions that pervade London society. And - as someone who has undergone these experiences whilst engaging with the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In this talk I'm going to focus on some of the social divisions that exist in London - but before I get stuck into that, I want to make a preliminary comment. Although there are very real divisions affecting the lives of people in this city - on the whole I'm wary of painting a bleak picture. It is a point of some pride for me, as an adopted Londoner, that on the whole in this city rich and poor; black, white, and Asian; and believers of all different faiths and none, generally co-exist remarkably well - and it's a point of pride for me as an Englishman, that this capital city is widely acknowledged as a place of both welcome and refuge for people from across the planet.

Having said that, there are definitely divisions in the way people live here - and many are presently arguing that these divisions are deepening. London is, as ever, an intense and hectic furnace of rapid social change and the site of a cataclysm of manifold global forces. Of course this is nothing new. A born and bred Londoner, the writer G. K. Chesterton, stated at the beginning of the 20th Century that London is 'beast, big enough...to be the beast in [the biblical] Apocalypse, blazing with a million eyes, [and] roaring with a million voices'.¹

Today I want to ask what resources we might find for building community in London from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. That Bonhoeffer was concerned with *life together*, is an undeniable fact. We can see this arising in part from a basic Christian concern for community. To give it a Scriptural basis, we might turn to Galatians 3:28, where the apostle Paul states that for those 'clothed in Christ' there 'is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'. To apply this to contemporary London, then, we might ask how can Bonhoeffer help us in bringing these words to life afresh today? How can we understand ourselves as living together in one community, in the face of the divisions that exist between, say, a Nigerian in Camberwell and a Polish person in Willesden, the resident of a tower-block in Bermondsey and an investment banker living in Kensington, or a veiled Muslim woman in Tower Hamlets and a trendy hipster in Shoreditch?

Three Divisions. I'm going to discuss 3-lines of social division that exist in contemporary London. These are: the division between rich

and poor; the division between different cultures, and the division between the secular and the religious. For each of these I'm going to give an instance from Bonhoeffer's biography where he encountered relatively similar divisions in his own life, and then offer some reflections which could give us some resources for living together amongst these divisions.

Division of rich and poor. Regarding the division between rich and poor, a recent survey established that 2.1 million people here are living in poverty, which is 28% of the London population. The child poverty rate in Tower Hamlets is the highest in the UK, with 42% of children below the poverty line. There are consequences in things like healthcare and education. In Kensington and Chelsea 20% of school pupils leave without 5 GCSE's - but in Waltham Forest the figure is 47%. A woman born in Kensington has a projected life expectancy of 92, a woman born in Southwark can only expect to live to the age of 72. The division between rich and poor in London was referred to recently in one study as making life in the city now feel 'schizophrenic' - and an article on the issue in *Time Out* last year was entitled: 'London: A Tale of Two Cities'.

So, where in Bonhoeffer's life should we look to try and find some resources for building community amongst these divisions? There are many instances where he worked with people in material need. A prime example happened a couple of years before he came here to South London, when he led a confirmation class in Wedding, a (then) working class district of Prenzlauer Berg, in East Berlin.

Bonhoeffer describes this district as the area of Berlin with 'the most difficult social and political conditions'.² To think of an equivalent to this confirmation class for us, we're probably talking about some of the worst delinquent youths of London, in the most challenging inner-city comprehensives, in the most deprived parts of the city.

Bonhoeffer was enlisted to teach this class of rough boys after the elderly pastor who had been schooling them found them impossible to control. Bonhoeffer told the story of arriving to teach his first session. He says he arrived with the aged minister, and while walking up the stairs of the school building, the boys were clambering over the banisters, shouting at them, and hurling books and pens as missiles aimed at their heads. When they got to the top, the elderly man introduced Bonhoeffer, and the boys began chanting his name, while banging the tables, steadily getting louder and louder. Bonhoeffer seems to have taken this all in his stride. He waited patiently until they calmed down, then began to tell them stories about the time he'd spent

¹Ian Ker, *Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) p.101

²Eberhard Bethge *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Glasgow: William Collins & Co. 1985) p. 168

in New York City. It's reported that 'after that he had no more cause to complain' about their unruly behaviour or 'lack of attentiveness'.³

He went on to build a profound relationship with these boys, despite the obstacles of working with the less advantaged. He took to the class so enthusiastically in fact, that he kept the commitments involved in his job lecturing at the University of Berlin to a complete minimum for some months. He writes that during this time he 'devoted' himself 'almost completely' to these boys. He even left a lecture at the University half way through, to go and visit one boy having an operation at hospital,⁴ leaving his students waiting in the lecture hall. To strengthen his relationship with the boys, Bonhoeffer moved out of the desirable, upper middle-class suburb where he lived with his parents in Grunewald, to rent a room just north of Alexanderplatz. This was a poor district, where brutal street fights between communists and Nazis were an almost daily occurrence. One friend of his warned him that, with such social conditions, it would be very unsafe for a well-to-do pastor to live in such a setting. But Bonhoeffer ignored his friend; and kept open house for the boys, spending his evenings teaching them English and playing chess with them.

Bonhoeffer knew first-hand the poverty these boys lived in. So, when the confirmation ceremony came, he bought a large amount of fabric from a tailor, and arranged for suits to be cut for the boys to wear on the day, paying from his own pocket. It's clear that Bonhoeffer's devotion to these boys was immensely significant for him personally. He felt that with these unruly tearaways, he was much closer to something he was looking for, than he felt among the Berlin intelligentsia. After they were confirmed, he writes, '[t]he teaching I gave [these boys] is such that I cannot just stop', and he carried on mentoring them until he moved to London. He even took them to his parent's holiday home in the Harz Mountains. For the poor boys from east Berlin, this 150-mile trip was said to be 'like a journey to the end of the world'. The housekeeper was aghast at this invasion of unkempt inner-city youngsters, and turned her nose up at them disapprovingly. But, the trip was largely a success - as we know from a letter Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents thanking them - and admittedly also apologising for the breaking of a window by an errant football. That Bonhoeffer made a deep impression can be seen from the fact that, in 1985, one of these boys - now a pensioner - saw a picture of Bonhoeffer in an advert for a conference and made a 70km journey across the DDR, to the holiday resort of Hirschluch where the conference was being held. On arrival he gave a deeply moving account of how his encounter with Bonhoeffer

'remained one of the [most] unforgettable experiences of his life'.⁵

Given that Bonhoeffer saw this experience as of fundamental personal significance, it is not surprising that it bore some theological reflections. Here, I want to quote a passage from a sermon Bonhoeffer preached in London, at St Paul's just over the other side of Tower Bridge. The congregation there were more down-at-heel than up here in SE23, as the parish was deep in the old East End.

In this sermon Bonhoeffer speaks of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a 'carpenter's wife [...] a poor working man's wife, unknown, not highly regarded by others: yet [...] regarded by God and chosen to be the mother of the Saviour of the world.' 'God' he says, chose 'to make great what is lowly, unremarkable, [and] considered to be of little value. Mary, the tough, devout, ordinary working man's wife [...] becomes the mother of God'. 'Christ', is claims Bonhoeffer, 'the poor son of a labourer from the East End of London'. He goes on, 'God is not ashamed of human lowliness, but goes right into the middle of it [and] performs [...] miracles right there where they are least expected. God draws near to the lowly, loving the lost, the unnoticed, the unremarkable, the excluded, the powerless, and the broken [...] what people say is "condemned", God says is "saved" [...] where people turn their eyes away in [...] arrogance, God gazes with a love that glows warmer there than anywhere else. Where people say something is despicable, God calls it blessed [...] when God chooses Mary [...] this is not an idyllic family occasion but rather the beginning of a complete reversal. [...] If we want to be part of this event' he says, 'we cannot just sit there like a theatre audience. [...] We ourselves will be caught up in this action, this reversal of all things. Then he adds, 'the throne of God in the world is set not on the thrones of humankind but in humanity's deepest abyss, and '[t]here are no flattering courtiers standing around his throne, just some rather dark, unknown, dubious-looking figures'.

He goes on: 'There are never more than a few very powerful people' in this world. 'But there are many more people with small amounts of power, petty power, who put it into play wherever they can' and their only 'thought is: keep climbing higher' up the social scale. 'God, however, thinks differently, namely, keep climbing down lower - down among the lowly and inconspicuous. If we go this way, says Bonhoeffer, we 'meet God himself'. 'Each of us knows someone who is lower in the order of things than we ourselves'. Might we 'see this point in a radically different way, were we 'to know that if we really want to find the way to God, [we] have to go, not up to the heights, but [...] down to the depths among the least of all? [...] Then he finishes with the remarkable comment, that '[i]t is an important matter for a Christian

community to come to an understanding of this point', and 'to draw the consequences for its members' life together'.⁶

So, before moving on, it seems Bonhoeffer has a clear theological *rationale* which could be applied to the experience he had with the boys of east Berlin - that is, to build community in the face of a division between rich and poor is not merely an altruistic responsibility - but has for him much more significance - because it is precisely among the poor that we meet God.

Division of Culture. For the second point of social division I'm going to talk about the divisions that exist between people of different cultures. I don't think I need to spend too long giving statistical evidence for the fact London is indeed a truly global city. It's now accepted it might be the most multicultural place on Earth, with significant minorities from over 90 different countries, and over half the schoolchildren here now having English as a second language. However, this is not all plain sailing. Within six months of each other, both the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the British Prime Minister David Cameron, recently made speeches critical of multiculturalism - with Cameron saying that 'multiculturalism in Britain has failed'. Neither of these leaders meant that 'ethnic and cultural diversity had not been allowed to flourish', but rather that 'state policy' on the issue 'had failed to' encourage satisfactory levels of 'social cohesion or consensus' across different communities.⁷

So where in Bonhoeffer's life can we look to think about life together among people of different cultures? Bonhoeffer had a post-doctoral placement in New York in 1930/1. Soon after his arrival, it became clear that his intellectually sophisticated German training would not fit comfortably into the American scene. He seems to have been disappointed with American theology, and the atmosphere of US Protestantism. He found the preaching particularly frustrating, bemoaning the thoughtless application of vague 'New Testament principles' to social and economic matters - rather than hearing the living and vital proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He received numerous invites to speak at events, but turned most of them down. However, there was one set of commitments he devoted himself to wholeheartedly; his work with the African American community of Harlem. This was quite a radical step for the tweed-suit wearing, bespectacled, blond German. It probably came about through his befriending an African American called Frank Fisher. It took Bonhoeffer a great deal of time

³Ibid. p. 168

⁴Ibid. p. 169

⁵Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, (London: T & T Clark 2010) (trans. Isabel Best) p. 105-7 and Bethge, op. cit.

⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935*, (edited by Keith Clements, translated by Isabel Best) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) p. 345-7

⁷Paul D. Janz, *Between the constraints of Freedom and the Aspirations of Love: On Bergson, Levinas, and Theology in the Service of Politics*, in *The Vocation of Theology Today: A Festschrift for David Ford* (Edited by Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers and Simone Zahl) (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock 2013)

and effort to win Frank Fisher's trust.⁸ Having done so, they attended a black congregation in Harlem together; the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Here Bonhoeffer heard the only preaching that really impressed him in the USA, and he threw himself into African American culture as deeply as possible. On returning to Berlin he wrote a report for the Church Federation Office of the Old Prussian Union. One can't help but wonder if this report raised a few eyebrows in that office in Berlin when it arrived. Bonhoeffer wrote that for over six months he had attended a large church in Harlem every Sunday at 2.30pm, and together with his friend taught a group of young people in the Sunday School. He also recorded that he led a Bible study for black women and spent one day a week at a church school working with the children. He goes on, 'not only did I become well acquainted with African Americans, I visited their homes several times'.⁹ True to form, as ever, Bonhoeffer seems to have made a deep impression. A woman who worked at the Abyssinian Baptist church thirty years later in the 1960s, found numerous elderly members of the congregation with fond memories of the quote 'blond German pastor' who lived among them for those months.¹⁰

Bonhoeffer took this dedication further than personal encounters, and tried to understand the plight of the black community as best as he could. He went on guided tours of Harlem, and took a flight over the black districts of New York, where he recorded that people lived 'at a density of 170,000 to the square mile',¹¹ and commented on the 'unbelievable' conditions in which they were forced to live.¹² He collected the publications of what was then called 'the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People', and attending a module on 'Modern Literature', he devoured all the African American writing he could lay his hands on.¹³

So what drove Bonhoeffer's fascination with African American culture? In his report he writes: my 'personal acquaintance with black people was one of the most important and gratifying events of my stay in America'. He goes on, 'I heard the gospel preached in [these] churches'. It seems there was something in the immediate reality of the proclamation of the Gospel, which grasped Bonhoeffer's attention. He writes, that in a black church 'the enormous intensity of

feeling among the [...] people repeatedly finds expression in their outcries and interrupting shouts'. Moreover, he says when 'the gospel itself [...] is mentioned, their participation peaks'. 'In contrast with the often lecture-like character of the white sermon', he says, 'the "black Christ" is preached with captivating passion and vividness'. Here, he says, 'one could still hear someone talk in a Christian sense about sin and grace, and the love of God and ultimate hope – albeit in a form different from that to which we are accustomed'.¹⁴

So where can we look for reflections for building community in our situation? An interesting starter here, are some comments made by a friend of Bonhoeffer's from the US, called Paul Lehmann. Lehmann discusses what he calls a 'paradox' of 'nationality' he observed in Bonhoeffer. This comes from his observation that Bonhoeffer was undeniably the most *German* person he'd ever met, and yet had equally a marked openness to people of different cultures. In a BBC interview Lehmann said:

"[Bonhoeffer] was German in his passion for perfection, whether of manners, or performance, of all that is connotated by the word *Kultur*. Here, in short, was an aristocracy of the spirit at its best" Yet, he also says, "His aristocracy was unmistakable [...] chiefly, I think, owing to his boundless curiosity about every new environment in which he found himself [...] This curiosity about the new and the different [is] the capacity to see the world and oneself from a perspective different from oneself and the world from a perspective different from one's own. The paradox of nationality in Bonhoeffer 'has seemed to me increasingly during the years since to have made him an exciting and conspicuous example of the triumph over parochialism of every kind'.¹⁵

To demonstrate this 'paradox of nationality', I want to look at a passage of his writing from the mid-1930s, where we see a desire to re-orientate some aspects of German church life, away from the disproportionately intellectualised tendencies which were common in the Berlin milieu. But the really important thing here is that Bonhoeffer seems to have been awakened to this by the 'captivating passion and vividness' of Harlem. There, he was awakened to something, which disclosed a point of authenticity buried in his own tradition, something that had been lost sight of in the face of an overly-developed intellectualised theology.

There are numerous examples that can be invoked here, but I'm choosing one where Bonhoeffer criticises what he calls 'pseudotheology'; a clever way of arguing about the gospel of Jesus, which amounts to an evasion of responsibility. This discussion occurs in a book, which was intended as a

'retrieval of [Martin] Luther'. Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem led him into a greater understanding of his own background – namely, to Luther and the protestant Reformation, and this gave him the impetus for sweeping away some of the obstacles that stood between him and his fellows hearing the gospel with the same 'captivating passion' with which it was once preached by Luther himself, and as he heard it preached in 1930 in Harlem.

He discusses a passage in Matthew ch. 19 (16-22) where a rich young man is told by Jesus 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor' and then 'follow me'. The young man, we read, 'went away from Jesus sad, for he had many possessions'. Bonhoeffer complains at how theological training has equipped people with the ability to come up with ways to argue that the young man was not really supposed to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor. He writes, 'if Jesus Christ' were to speak to one of us today 'then we would probably argue thus: Jesus is making a [...] commandment; that's true. But when Jesus commands', he only wants us to believe. 'Thus, Jesus says "sell your possessions!" but what he means is that it is not important to actually do so.' He gives examples of pseudotheology from the contemporary academic scene, and closes the discussion with the example a child being told to go to bed by their parents: The parents 'say to the child: go to bed!' But a child 'drilled in pseudotheology, would argue thus: my parents say go to bed. They mean I am tired; and they don't want me to be tired. I can also overcome my tiredness by going to play. So, although my parents say go to bed, they [actually] mean that I should go and play [with my friends]'.¹⁶

The point here is that in these passages, Bonhoeffer uses the 'captivating passion and vividness' of his African American encounters to disclose concealed elements of his own tradition. To see just how radical Bonhoeffer is here, an equivalent for London would be a young English person becoming deeply involved in, say, the African Pentecostal churches of the Old Kent Road or Camberwell High Street, and finding resources for a retrieval of a great English figure, like Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, or John Henry Newman. The mind does indeed boggle at this possibility.

So Bonhoeffer's 'paradox of nationality' – an unmistakable German identity coupled with a corresponding 'triumph over parochialism of every kind' – offers an approach to living amongst cultural divisions, which sees cross-cultural community arising through a boundless openness to others, combined with a deepening of cultural self-knowledge precisely *through* our life together.

⁸Schlingensiepen p. 65

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, Translated by Douglas W. Scott, English edition edited by Clifford J. Green) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) s: (hereafter: DBWE 10) p. 314-5 trans. altered

¹⁰Schlingensiepen p. 65

¹¹Bethge p. 109

¹²Schlingensiepen p. 65

¹³Bethge p. 109

¹⁴DBWE 10 p. 315f

¹⁵Bethge p. 114

¹⁶Bonhoeffer, Dietrich *Discipleship*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) (trans. altered) p. 79-80

Division Between Secular and Religious. For my third point, I want to talk about the division between the secular and the religious. Britain has become an increasingly secular nation. In the last census, the number of Christians had plummeted from 71% to 59%. The lack of religious literacy among the young is well-documented. A top BBC official commented recently, that the Monty Python film, *The Life of Brian* could never work today, because the gospel stories underpinning it, are not known by many people anymore. Moments where religious and secular come up against each other are quite common in the media, like with the nurse who was sacked recently for offering to pray for a patient, on the grounds she had quote failed to "demonstrate a personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity".¹⁷ In institutions like the media and the financial markets the deep secularity of modern Britain is most perceptible. Modern financial trading seems a far cry indeed from the nominally Christian capitalism of the 19th Century, for example.

However, what makes *London* quite divided in this regard, is that fact it seems to buck the secularisation trend. Although the number of Christians nosedived by 3.8 million in Britain before the last census, in nine London boroughs, the number of Christians actually increased, with Hackney and Newham topping the list. In seven London boroughs, a reverse secularisation took place – with the number of nonreligious people in Redbridge and Newham actually being cut in half. So London is actually quite unique - it is the centre of an increasingly secular media and the financial markets – and yet has an increasingly religious population. More and more, it seems, people are faced with the difficulties involved in working in a secular society, while practising a deeply-held faith.

Bonhoeffer's life is potentially very helpful for providing resources for building community amongst this division. This is because the working relationships which were the most significant towards the end of his life were forged in the secular sphere; namely, his involvement in the conspiracy to try and topple the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer's involvement in political resistance meant leaving the religious sphere. He was working with people with whom he could not talk about his religious convictions, and he had to make decisions quickly, without consulting his Bible or asking his mentors, let alone suggesting a moment of quiet prayer with his colleagues.

Bonhoeffer's friend Eberhard Bethge comments that when he was with his new secular companions in the conspiracy, his 'Christian existence did not often emerge in simple form', for he 'instinctively kept the [Christian] part of [himself] in the background'. But, he says this is where

Bonhoeffer entered 'fully into his contemporary world, his place and his time', in which he 'accepted the weight of collective responsibility and began to identify himself with those' who were trying 'to shape something new for the future'.¹⁸ In a letter from 1942, we get a first-hand account of what this was like. He writes, '[m]y recent activity, which has largely been in the worldly sector, gives me much to think about. I am amazed that I am living, and can live, for days without the Bible [...] I realise that I have had much richer times in the "spiritual sense". 'But' - and here is the interesting bit - 'I sense how an opposition to all that is "religious" is growing in me'. This, he says, 'amounts to an instinctive revulsion' of cheap religious talk. He then says, 'I am not religious by nature. But I must constantly think of God, of Christ,' and of 'life' and 'mercy' which all 'mean a great deal to me. It is only that the religious clothes [these things] wear make me [feel very] uncomfortable'.¹⁹

To locate some theological reflections from this, we can turn to Bethge's statement, that in becoming secular, Bonhoeffer had to accept 'the uncertain, the incomplete, and the provisional'. This was a position Bethge describes as 'duller and more cramped', than being overtly religious. But, he also says, Bonhoeffer realised through being forced into the secular sphere that it this is 'what it now meant to be a Christian'.²⁰

Although Bonhoeffer was obviously in exceptional circumstances, I think it may offer us resources for living with faith in a secular city like London. A Christian response to the division with the secular world, in this reading, is not to go all otherworldly, and turn one's back on the society, nor try and convert society by proclaiming the gospel all the louder. Even less is it a question of trying to sow the seeds of faith surreptitiously. On the contrary, it seems that what Bonhoeffer offers us here is a disposition involving a willingness to surrender to the secular moment – to leave aside self-assured religious certainties in the 'acceptance of the uncertain' – on behalf of others. Seen in this way, merely proclaiming religious platitudes in the face of worldly complexities can actually become an avoidance of responsibility. And it is in this sense, I think, we can understand some of Bonhoeffer's revulsion to religious talk, compared to the seriousness he witnessed in the sober-minded and responsible decision making of his secular companions. These strands of Bonhoeffer's thinking climax in the prison letters. There Bonhoeffer presents religionless Christianity as a high-point of the incarnation of Christ in the world – a process by which Jesus truly becomes lord of the world, in and through the untangling of cheap religious sentiments which stand in the way of

authentic life – the accepting of responsibility for others.

Summing-Up. To sum-up all this up - in contemporary London we're given a rather unique setting for bringing to life these elements from Bonhoeffer I've mentioned today. In London people find themselves in an increasingly secular country, and yet rubbing shoulders with people of all faiths in remarkable proximity, and amongst one of the largest gaps between rich and poor on this Earth. And all this is taking place, conversely, against the background of a city whose history and architecture show inescapably, that London was a primary nerve centre of Christendom for over a thousand years.

To return to the quote I gave at the beginning from G. K. Chesterton – this was written while he was reflecting on the forms of otherworldliness on offer in London around the end of the Victorian era, when different groups were criticising the dark, slum-ridden megatropolis that emerged after a century of industrialisation. Chesterton states 'unless we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful'. He refers to the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, which is why he says 'modern London' is 'indeed' an ugly 'beast, big enough...to be the beast in [the biblical] Apocalypse, blazing with a million eyes, [and] roaring with a million voices'. 'But' – he goes on – 'unless one love[s] this fabulous monster' one cannot change it into a beautiful 'princess'.²¹

The things pointed to here - Bonhoeffer's life together with the poor, with people of other cultures and with a secular society – offer us some resources, I hope, to understand how we might go about loving the unruly beast of contemporary London, and doing this, so we really get to see it as a thing of beauty. That is, a place where there is no longer 'jew and greek, slave or free' – or even believer and non-believer – for it is truly a place which offers a unique opportunity to put it into practice Bonhoeffer's call to live together in one community. © *Jacob Phillips, DBCL 2014.*

ESSAYS & BOOK REVIEWS

Meins G. S. Coetsier: *Etty Hillesum and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

On the 15th of January 2014, it was hundred years ago that Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born in Middelburg, the Netherlands. The Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC) of Ghent University commemorated this anniversary with an international congress. Rev. Dr. Ulrich Lincoln and Dr. Dr. Meins G.S. Coetsier of the DBCL were both invited to give a paper in relation to this Dutch Jewish young woman.

As Hillesum scholar and co-organizer of the event, Meins G.S. Coetsier has been fascinated by the equivalences and differences of spiritual experience in Bonhoeffer and Hillesum. As he wrote in his 2013 article "»Humanity's Secret Code« Bonhoeffer and

¹⁸Bethge p. 581

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*, (English edition edited by Mark S. Brouck and translated by Lisa E. Dahill) (hereafter: DBWE 16) p. 329; cf. Schlingensiepen p. 295

²⁰Bethge p. 582

²¹ See n. 1

¹⁷<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/4787050/Prayer-nurse-Caroline-Petrie-returns-to-work.html>

Hillesum and the New Science of Political Theology”:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Etty Hillesum are among Europe's most influential religious thinkers of the twentieth century. Their life stories are marked by the political disorder of their time, and by the inner experiential problem that has haunted western civilization for thousands of years: man's rise to power, the abuse of that power, and its horrific consequences.

He describes Bonhoeffer and Hillesum as

*thoughtful writers, whose lives illustrate an idiosyncratic disclosure of human consciousness of »humanity's secret code«: namely God's redemptive powerlessness in the context of an intellectually or morally ruined society. They point toward a restoration of society's political order for next generations, arguably offering us valuable experiential, spiritual and reflective tools for a new »science of political theology«. [Coetsier, Meins G.S., "»Humanity's Secret Code« Bonhoeffer and Hillesum and the New Science of Political Theology." In: *Dem Rad in die Speichen fallen. A Spoke in the Wheel: Das Politische in der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers. The Political in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Eds. Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ralf Karolus Wüstenberg, Jens Zimmermann, 203-219. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013.]*

Coetsier has focused his research on “the human in their works: faith in a powerless and helpless God amid contrary political conditions for the rejection of that faith.” In his 2014 monograph *The Existential Philosophy of Etty Hillesum: An Analysis of Her Diaries and Letters (Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, Brill Academic Publishers, 2014) he develops this thought in greater detail, and breaks new ground by demonstrating the Jewish existential nature of Etty Hillesum's spiritual and cultural life in light of the writings of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Hillesum's diaries and letters, written between 1941 and 1943, illustrate her struggle to come to terms with her personal life in the context of the Second World War and the Shoah. By finding God under the rubble of the horrors, she rediscovers the divine presence between humankind, while taking up responsibility for the Other as a way to embrace justice and compassion.

In a fascinating, accessible and thorough study, Coetsier dispels much of the confusion that assails readers when they are exposed to the bewildering range of Christian and Jewish influences and other cultural interpretations of her writings. The result is a convincing and profound picture of Etty Hillesum's path to spiritual freedom.

At the same time, he gives a rich, detailed, and beautiful account of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's inner life during his time in prison—that is, by comparing and contrasting the spiritual narrative of Hillesum's works with that of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, providing us with new insight into the depth of the human spirit.

Subsequently, another major work concerning Etty Hillesum that should be mentioned here, significantly contributing to the 2014 Centennial Celebration, is *Etty Hillesum: the Complete Works 1941-1943: Bilingual, Annotated and Unabridged - Publication in Two Volumes* (Shaker Publishing B.V, 2014). For the first time, the complete works of Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) are available in a two-volume, bilingual edition. This definitive collection of Etty Hillesum's diaries and letters, including extensive footnotes and annotations to the text, chronicles Hillesum's social, intellectual, and spiritual growth and her profound personal reflections. The original texts of her diaries and letters—in Dutch, with some German—are reproduced on each left page. The right page contains the English version, based on the 1983 and 2002 translations by Arnold J. Pomerans, but revised and supplemented. This new, authoritative edition, edited by Meins G.S. Coetsier and Klaas A.D. Smelik, invites readers to understand and appreciate more fully the unique journey and spirit of this remarkable woman.

Finally, the interest in Etty Hillesum is developing steadily worldwide and of late also stronger in the German speaking countries. The first Swiss symposium, *»Das denkende Herz der Baracke« - Interdisziplinäres Kolloquium zum 100. Geburtstag von Etty Hillesum (1914-1943)*, organised by Dr. Dr. Meins G.S. Coetsier, Prof. Dr. Pierre Bühler, and Dr. Marja Clement, will be held at Zurich University from 28-29 November 2014. © Meins G. S. Coetsier, DBCL 2014.

Book Review: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters To London. Bonhoeffer's previously unpublished correspondence with Ernst Cromwell 1935-36, edited by Stephen J. Plant and Toni Burrowes-Cromwell, London 2013*

Sometimes there are treasures hidden in the attic – or just between pages of books. In the autumn of 2010, so the editors of this slim volume inform the reader, a number of letters written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer were found in a London family home during refurbishment. The addressee of the letters was still alive: Ernst Cromwell, born 1921, a former *Konfirmand* of Bonhoeffer during the last months of his pastorate in London. Cromwell had kept these letters for decades interleaved in a number of books. The letters have been published by Stephen Plant, one of the leading

British experts on Bonhoeffer, and by Toni Burrowes-Cromwell, Ernst's daughter-in-law.

The little book renders 12 letters from Bonhoeffer to the boy and his family while the letters that Bonhoeffer had received from them are lost. Bonhoeffer's letters tell a story about a friendship and private correspondence, which nevertheless bears great significance for everyone interested in Bonhoeffer's biography and character. Cromwell's family had moved to London from Nuremberg in 1934 because his father, a lawyer, came from a Jewish family. His mother was a Lutheran, and she wanted his son to be confirmed by the pastor of the German Church in Sydenham. Bonhoeffer seemed to have formed a friendship with the family. Following the confirmation of Ernst and some other youngsters in February or March 1935, Bonhoeffer had hoped to go with his confirmation class on a hiking tour in Scotland, as an appendix to his own trip to Mirfield and Kelham that he had undertaken in preparing for his new job in the Finkenwalde Predigerseminar. In the end, only Ernst Cromwell was able to come along on the tour. They met in Edinburgh and spend a few days in the Highlands; the pictures of Bonhoeffer and Ernst on the snowy peak of Ben Nevis appear on the front and back page of the volume.

The 12 letters to Ernst and his family cover the time from March 1935 to March 1936. These letters are rather short and private, but they show the pastoral side of Bonhoeffer: How he tries to keep in touch with this confirmation boy even after he left London, and to share some of his thoughts about life and faith with him. He seems to want to offer his help in forming a young person's life. The letters remind us that Bonhoeffer obviously was an enthusiastic youth minister, as we know from his time in Berlin.

This book is a wonderful little gift. The letters are accompanied by notes and original photographs, as well as several essays. Stephen Plant puts the story of these letters in the wider context of Bonhoeffer's biography, and Toni Burrowes-Cromwell takes this story as an example of the church's ongoing task to nourish young people's spiritual growth in today's society. And finally, there is an interview with Ernst Cromwell included. Here he speaks himself, as a 92 year old man, about this brief time in his life almost 80 years ago. Far from enshrining Bonhoeffer, and also far from any Bonhoefferian disciples and experts, he talks about what he learned from that young pastor – and what not: “I don't think that he actually taught anything, he let the Scripture teach you and that's what it actually did. I mean, my insights into the meaning of what you find in the New Testament came from the Scriptures, not from him; he didn't tell me anything about justice or anything, but he let the Scripture teach me” (p.43).

The book is a gift to everyone interested in Bonhoeffer's life and work, but it holds a particular value for those folks who today are part of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Church in Sydenham and Forest Hill. It tells a story from the past which sheds light on the ongoing responsibility of this Christian community to serve and to nourish people, young and old, in the name of Christ. © Ulrich Lincoln, DBCL 2014.

Book Review: *Matthew D. Kirkpatrick, Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age. Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of "Religionless Christianity", Princeton Theological Monograph Series 166, 2011*

This book by an Oxford scholar deals with the theological relationship between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard had lived almost 100 years before Bonhoeffer's days but his work had been very influential for the theological movement which was called *Dialektische Theologie*, and which included people like Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Kierkegaard was a key part of the intellectual flow that informed the new German theology after the war with which Bonhoeffer also became involved as a student. And throughout his life Kierkegaard's name pops up in his writing. Kirkpatrick's book is the first extensive study on the question in which way Bonhoeffer was influenced by Kierkegaard's work.

His book pursues that question on two different levels: First, the author wants to show that Bonhoeffer as a reader and writer actually was very familiar with Kierkegaard's writings, and that some of his central ideas and concepts can be traced back directly to his reading Kierkegaard. Second, he tries to exhibit a systematic line from Kierkegaard to Bonhoeffer, an intellectual formation which turns out to be central to Bonhoeffer's own theological thinking. The *tertium comparationis*, the point at which both authors can be brought together for a dialogue, is the question of reform and attack: Just as Kierkegaard's work and life culminates in his (in)famous attack on the Danish Lutheran church in 1854-55, so Bonhoeffer's development reached its peak by his participation in the political resistance as well as by his ideas about a "religionless Christianity" in his letters from Tegel.

In a first step, Kirkpatrick briefly traces Kierkegaard's thinking from the first publications up till the attack in 1854. He then tells the story of Bonhoeffer's life leading to his involvement in the plot against Hitler. Both these chapters are of introductory character establishing the historic background for the following investigation. However, any deeper engagement with the texts are missing at this stage. The author tells a rather conventional story of these two writers and their respective intellectual and biographic formation.

The next three chapters develop a line of interpretation under the heading of "Attack on

Idealism". Kirkpatrick wants to prove that both authors are formed by their opposition to German Idealism, mainly Hegel and Kant. This constellation is applied to the questions of epistemology, ethics and Christology. The intellectual dispute with idealism, so goes Kirkpatrick's story, helps Kierkegaard as well as Bonhoeffer to develop their own conceptual weapons for their decisive theological attacks, respectively: the attack on Christendom.

Kirkpatrick's logic of interpretation is as suggestive as it is simplistic: The intellectual attack on idealism by both authors serve as a precondition for their respective attacks on Christendom and, at the same time, as the heading under which the similarities of both are reconstructed. It seems too simplistic, firstly, to subsume their respective works under this one topic: attack on idealism. What this term really means is never explained (Kierkegaard's ambivalent debate with Hegel and Schelling is miles away from Bonhoeffer's reading of Kant and Hegel in his first two books) except for a brief note in Bonhoeffer's dissertation. And secondly, it seems too simplistic to suggest that this first attack leads both authors directly to their respective attack against Christendom. These stories are much more complex.

However, along the way there are some interesting findings. For example Kirkpatrick is able to demonstrate the influence that Kierkegaard's texts had on Bonhoeffer's *Dicipleship*. He also shows that Kierkegaard is not as anti-worldly or even gnostic-dualistic in his later writings as it sometimes appears, but rather that he is close to Bonhoeffer's notion of worldliness; they both call for a return to a simpler, purer form of Christian life, and this is the positive side of what Kirkpatrick calls their respective "attack on Christendom".

One might ask if the wording of this motto, which follows Kierkegaard's language is the proper heading for what Bonhoeffer is doing in his time. Is it really appropriate to call Bonhoeffer's notes on religionless Christianity an attack? Again, one wonders if the very differences between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, in their historical situation, their thinking and their actions, allow for such a way of lumping together; just to name the most obvious: Bonhoeffer's participation in the resistance in the 1940s is something completely different from Kierkegaard's public attack on the Church of Denmark 100 years before, and so are his thoughts about the future of the Christian faith. These differences and many others tend to be overseen by an interpretation which at times shows some good observations, but which overall tries too hard to find the similarities between two authors who are so very different in style, language, interest and time. Kirkpatrick's wants to construct a dialogue between these two writers, and he has to be applauded for this ambition; however, I am afraid that he did not succeed in doing so.

Methodologically the interpretation too often reduces the works of both authors to psychological and biographical facts. The

question of Bonhoeffer's reception of Kierkegaard often is identified with the positivist inquiry into what Kierkegaard-texts the younger man might actually have read, and which Bonhoeffer passages might mirror a familiarity with the Danish author. But of course, reading an author is not the same as understanding an author. And that seems to me the main question: how Bonhoeffer understood what he (perhaps) read. Also, more than once a psychologistic misunderstanding creeps into the interpretation. For example, Kirkpatrick calls Bonhoeffer's understanding of true discipleship, which is completely focused on Christ, an "unconscious discipleship" (171). This term is completely misleading; it leaves out any theological investigation into what is really at stake here, namely the nature of intentionality and the relation between subjectivity and objectivity.

The book provides some interesting information, especially in its interpretation of Kierkegaard's attack on the church. Here the comparison with Bonhoeffer really helps to shed new light on the substance of Kierkegaard's angry writing. However, in large parts the book is disappointing. There is no sign that the author is very familiar with the current Kierkegaard research. For example, the fact that Kierkegaard is not an extreme individualistic thinker, as the old stereotype has it, but a highly inventive thinker of social interaction, language and communication, as has been highlighted in recent commentaries on works like *Works of Love*, is left out of this account. Kirkpatrick's interpretation of the Dane is at times more like a reading of Kierkegaard through Bonhoeffer's eyes from the 1920s than an actual critical interpretation of Kierkegaard in the light of current research. Which is also a shame for any critical interpretation of Bonhoeffer. Because, it leads to a reductive interpretation of Bonhoeffer. Kirkpatrick's final claim "that Kierkegaard's notion of the individual is the foundation for Bonhoeffer's concept of community" (217) can hardly be upheld, neither genetically nor systematically. It applies a one-sided reading of Kierkegaard, and it reduces Bonhoeffer's struggle with a modern ecclesiology and sociology to an existentialistic cliché.

Kirkpatrick's book is still interesting to read because his presupposition certainly is correct: that Bonhoeffer was indeed strongly influenced by what he knew of Kierkegaard. But what that means, and how this vague and one-way influence can be transformed constructively into a reciprocal dialogue which is a critical and open debate from both sides – that is a task still to be mastered. © Ulrich Lincoln, DBCL 2014.

ESSAY

Kristina Wille: *Music and Poetry – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

When I think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and when I read in his texts and letters, I do this

with my ears as much as with my eyes. I am surprised that there are relatively few musical settings of his texts and I am wondering, whether a closer look into his writings and the academic literature would reveal insightful information about music and language in Bonhoeffer's world.

During my formative years as a musicologist I was surprised to see how the old dispute about music and language, music and poetry, instrumental music and vocal music, program and form etc. that originated in the nineteenth century was still very much alive amongst some of my fellow students. How some of them half pitifully smiled at those who spent their weekends in the opera house – or in churches listening to great sacral vocal music – rather than in the concert halls, listening to string quartets and symphonies – and vice versa. How the notion of the metaphysics of instrumental music and the construct of absolute music as “tonally moving form” still intrigued some, whilst others believed passionately in the idea, that all music is deeply interwoven with poetry or extra-musical meaning. I learned that it isn't necessarily a matter of course, to regard the voice as a place where words and music are inseparable.

At some point I came across a wonderful text by Ingeborg Bachmann, in which the voice takes centre stage, “Musik und Dichtung” (“Music and Poetry”) from the early sixties. In this text, she explains her utopian vision of the freedom of words, freedom of the faulty language that has been so brutally damaged by the barbaric system of the Nazi regime. For Bachmann, the most salient quality of music lies beyond the will to name things, beyond the rationality that is so closely connected with seeking dominance. Only when words come very close to the point when there is nothing more to say, music and poetry can meet in a “moment of truth”. But she insists that they do need to meet, despite or maybe even because of the horrible crimes committed also through and to language and art.

Bachmann's focus on the human voice, that should be acknowledged, and first of all **heard** again, is an expression of hope – hope that artists, poets, humans will find a way to speak and sing again, hope that there can be literature and art beyond the so called “Stunde Null” literature and the musical Avantgarde. Her text finishes:

“Es ist Zeit, dieser Stimme wieder Achtung zu erweisen, ihr unsere Worte, unsere Töne zu übertragen, ihr zu ermöglichen, zu den Wartenden und zu den Abgewandten zu kommen mit der schönsten Bemühung. Es ist Zeit, sie nicht mehr als Mittel zu begreifen, sondern als den Platzhalter für den Zeitpunkt, an dem Dichtung und Musik den Augenblick der Wahrheit miteinander haben. Auf diesem dunkelnden Stern, den wir bewohnen, am Verstummen, im

Zurückweichen vor zunehmendem Wahnsinn, beim Räumen von Herzländern, vor dem Abgang aus Gedanken und bei der Verabschiedung so vieler Gefühle, wer würde da - wenn sie noch einmal erklingt, wenn sie für ihn erklingt! - nicht plötzlich inne, was das ist: Eine menschliche Stimme.”

I always felt that this little and great text speaks of faith. And after first reading it, I couldn't help associating the last stanza of Bonhoeffer's famous poem resonating in my head:

Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen, erwarten wir getrost, was kommen mag. Gott ist bei uns am Abend und am Morgen und ganz gewiss an jedem neuen Tag.

For many, I think this poem speaks – or even sings – directly to our ears and through this to our hearts and conscience, as words of faith, trust, and hope in the face of cruelty, death and hopelessness.

I'm really not a Bonhoeffer expert. But I know, what I would like to learn in a study day about Music and Poetry and Bonhoeffer: What Music did Bonhoeffer like and what did he listen to? What inspired composers to set music to Bonhoeffer's words, what role did music play in his work as a pastor, in Germany and England – and what is it that makes some of Bonhoeffer's texts and poems'sound' and resonate with so many? © Kristina Wille, DBCL 2014.

NEWS FROM THE DBCL

On July 20 this year, Chichester Cathedral held a **commemoration** for the men and women who took part in the assassination on Hitler on July 20, 1944. Sven Griesenbeck, a member of the Bonhoeffer Church, attended the service and brought Bonhoeffer's private copy of Thomas a Kempen's book “De Imitatio Christi” which usually is kept in the Bonhoeffer Church to be displayed in the cathedral.

On November 15, Jacob Phillips and Ulrich Lincoln, both members of the DBCL will lead a **course** at the Study Centre of St Albans Cathedral. The theme is “War and Faith: WW1 and the Role of the Churches, Now and Then”. For further information, please visit <https://www.stalbanscathedral.org/learning/study-centre/>

Ulrich Lincoln will be a guest speaker at the Annual **Bonhoeffer Project**, which takes place in Birmingham on November 1, organised by the Student Christian Movement (SCM).

To announce activities related to the DBCL, contact: bonhoeffercentreondon@gmail.com.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Exhibition: “Bonhoeffer and the German Protestant Pastors in London in the 1930s”.

We are currently working on a new exhibition on Bonhoeffer. The title suggests that it will display texts, pictures and artefacts about the German speaking churches and their pastors in London at the time when Bonhoeffer was part of this community. In the 1930s there were 4 German pastors in London serving 7-8 parishes. The question was how to relate to the “new” Germany under Nation Socialism, and what should they position themselves with regard to the *Kirchenkampf* in Germany. The exhibition tries to provide some context for Bonhoeffer's struggle to direct the London parishes against the *Kirchenamt* in Berlin. It will also tell the stories of some of his colleagues who tried to steer their own way in those difficult years.

The exhibition will be displayed in the Bonhoeffer church, on the rear side of the nave. A date has not been fixed yet. We hope that we will see it before December this year.

Conference: “Exile and the Church”

“Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, emigrés, refugees”. This assessment by Edward Said points to the historical experience shared by millions of people all over the world: living in exile. For many emigrant churches like the Bonhoeffer Church exile is part of the very fabric of its history. Nowadays people move freely to other countries, but in the 1930s there were hundreds of thousands of Germans who had to leave their home country, and quite a few of them came to Britain.

This conference, which will take place sometime in 2015, will focus on the relationship between exile and the churches. What happened to the pastors who came to Britain in the 1930s? How did the German parishes and communities deal with the refuges? How did the British public react? And how what happened to those people who returned later? How does it feel to return to a country from where you once had to flee?

There are lots of historical questions. And then there is a theological question: How do we understand exile in theological terms? Is there a theological suspicion over against exile and the exiled? Further information about this project will be launched as soon as possible.

Bonhoeffer Remembrance Service

The Bonhoeffer Church in Sydenham, together with the DBCL will mark the 70th anniversary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death at Flossenbürg on 9 April 1945, with an evening service on 9 April 2015. Further information will be circulated in due course.

4th Bonhoeffer Day***"Voices in the Silent.
Poetry and Song in Cell 92"***

The Bonhoeffer Day 2015 will turn to sounds and voices, music and poetry, prison and faith. Bonhoeffer was a deeply musical nature, and his letters from the prison are filled with references to, and memories of, musical experiences. At the same time he writes poetry, and he lives daily with the poetic voices of the Biblical psalms. It seems that Bonhoeffer's life in prison cannot be understood without these many voices, which fill the memory and mind of the prisoner from cell 92. The Bonhoeffer Day 2015 wants to give these voices a new listening.

During the course of the day we will have a series of musical performances, with the main performance by The King Cave Project. In addition to music, we will have presentations and discussions. Among the speakers is Dr Martin Lind, Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Great Britain and former Bishop in the Lutheran Church of Sweden.



Taking place
31 January 2015

@

German Church Sydenham
50 Dacres Road, London SE23, UK

For further information, please contact Ulrich
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