



Whitefield BRIEFING

May 2004 (Vol.9 No.2)

Are We Any Use? Bonhoeffer and the Ruling Classes

Nigel Oakley

Given the use made of him by liberation theologians, specifically with his ‘view from below’, this paper examines how far Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified himself with the poor and the despised in Nazi Germany. His sympathy and work for them, especially the Jews, is not in doubt. The paper questions how far, if at all, Bonhoeffer repudiated his upper middle class roots with their ideals of social responsibility for the less fortunate – as opposed to ‘enfranchising’ or ‘conscientising’ them as the liberationists would.

Introduction:

At Christmas 1942, as a gift for his fellow conspirators against Adolf Hitler, Hans von Dohnanyi and Hans Oster, Dietrich Bonhoeffer penned a reflective essay entitled ‘After Ten Years’¹. In it he sums up his thoughts, feelings and aspirations following ten years of opposition to Hitler and all he stood for. While other church leaders had equivocated and compromised, Bonhoeffer had not. While other members of the upper middle classes and aristocracy had served Hitler and his schemes willingly, Bonhoeffer had joined the small band of conspirators who sought to overthrow and kill Hitler – in the full knowledge that failure would be disastrous personally, and potentially for their families.

Since Bonhoeffer’s death in 1945, at the hand of the Nazis, his work has grown in influence and importance. He has become a noted resource for liberation theologians – his ‘view from below’ is taken as axiomatic to their own perspective. For example, Gustavo Gutiérrez sees interplay between faith and political commitment in Bonhoeffer’s later writings. For Gutiérrez, the later Bonhoeffer had moved toward a theological outlook whose point of departure is in a faith lived by exploited classes ... The heretofore “absent from history” are making the free gift of the Father’s love their own today, creating new social relationships of a communion of brothers and sisters. This is the point of departure for what we call “theology from the underside of history.”²

This free gift and the new social relationships can be viewed as the basis of the poor’s political power – a power that the church, with its preferential option for the poor, should seek to give them. However, it is questionable that Bonhoeffer himself would really be interested in liberation theology with its notion of ‘conscientization of the poor.’ It seems to me that his approach, springing from his autocratic conservatism, runs more along the lines of *noblesse oblige* than ‘power to the people.’ It is this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s thought that I intend to explore in this essay.

1. Reprinted, as a prologue, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. John Bowden, Reginald Fuller et al. (London: SCM Press, enlarged edition 1971), pp. 1-17 (hereafter referred to as *LPP*).
2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 233.

‘We’ the strong, ‘we’ with responsibility:

In ‘After Ten Years’, Bonhoeffer asks the question: ‘Are we still of any use?’ Given that this essay was originally meant for his fellow conspirators who were born into the same class as himself, we must infer that the ‘we’ referred to is those who are already privileged, the strong, those who can make informed choices. This is still true in Bonhoeffer’s reflection on ‘The View from Below.’ ‘We have for once learnt to see the great events ... from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated ... in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.’ Whether or not this paragraph was intended to go with the rest of the essay, the approach of the ‘we’ is still that of the outsider. This is not one of those born to suffering – those who cannot choose to be part of the vilified.

Whether Bonhoeffer would ever have identified himself as part of the vilified is moot. His sympathy for and work with the disadvantaged – including the Harlem blacks he met whilst studying in the United States, the disadvantaged children he organised Youth clubs for when he was a pastor in Berlin, the Jews in anti-Semitic Germany, and finally his fellow inmates at Tegel prison (and the other places he was incarcerated) – is well documented.³ However, sympathy and working with people is not the same as identification with them. Bonhoeffer never repudiated his upbringing, his family home, nor its values; even in prison Bonhoeffer sees the goodness of his middle class situation. In his baptismal letter to his great-nephew and godson, written while he was behind bars, Bonhoeffer is still able to say that:

The urban middle-class culture embodied in the home of your mother’s parents has led to pride in public service, intellectual achievement and leadership, and a deep-rooted sense of duty towards a great heritage and cultural tradition. This will give you, even before you are aware of it, a way of thinking and acting which you can never lose without being untrue to yourself.⁴

Bonhoeffer was never interested in being untrue to himself, and would have seen no reason to deny his upbringing, even in prison. On the other hand that upbringing meant ‘pride in public service’, which in itself means consideration of others, even ‘the least of the brethren,’ but this a duty owed by the powerful to the powerless – not a

duty to enfranchise the oppressed.

This autocratic attitude can be seen in his *Ethics* (these writings were written in snatches at various locations in the early 1940s, prior to Bonhoeffer’s arrest). Here Bonhoeffer asserts that ‘it is granted to only very few men ... to experience the hazard of responsible action.’ These few men are, presumably the sort of people Bonhoeffer dealt with in the anti-Hitler conspiracy. Although Bonhoeffer is critical of a society that crushes those, outside of the great and the good, who ‘venture to act on their free responsibility’, with ‘the machinery of the social order’; he also, in the light of this ‘machinery’, seeks to redefine free responsibility:

every life can experience this situation [of free responsibility] in its most characteristic form, that is to say, in the encounter with other people. Even when free responsibility is more or less excluded from a man’s vocational and public life, he nevertheless always stands in a responsible relation to other men; these relations extend from his family to his workmates. The fulfilment of genuine responsibility at this point affords the only sound possibility of extending the sphere of responsibility once more into vocational and public life.⁵

In this and the following paragraph, one can detect signs of the conservative aristocrat (‘The apprentice has a duty of obedience towards his master, but at the same time he has also a free responsibility for his work, for his achievement and, therefore, also for his master’), but Bonhoeffer has clearly opened the door towards ordinary people becoming more involved with action for others. As with his theology from below, these moves are only tentative, and have not been fully worked through – there is tension here between the author of *Discipleship* who did not wish to see any upset of the social order, and the desire to see all humanity capable of exercising a free responsibility that accepts the ‘tension between obedience and freedom.’

Although, in his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer talks about recognising a “limited field of accomplishments” that may be a person’s lot, he insists that its boundary is broken both by Christ ‘from above’, ‘but also in an outward direction.’ In theory this can apply to everyone, but Bonhoeffer’s example is of a physician (like his father?) who may be called to take ‘public action against some measure which constitutes a threat to medical science ...’.

It would have been interesting to see how Bonhoeffer saw boundary breaking responsibility working for the apprentice (or the schoolboy, student, or industrial employee) whom he regarded as in a relationship of free responsibility, even while they held a duty of obedience to their respective masters. It is the professionals, such as church pastors, are encouraged to go beyond the “Lutheran” idea of the limitation of responsibility and care for the neighbour who is farthest away from them, even to the extent of breaking God’s own law ‘solely in order that the authority of life, truth and property may be restored.’ This means that acceptance of guilt is also a part of free responsibility, but, yet again, it is the professional classes who seem called to exercise this sort of guilt-accepting free responsibility; and that in order to bring about the proper restoration of ‘the authority of life truth and property.’

To View Things From Below:

How far Bonhoeffer, had he survived the Second World War, would have moved towards a liberationist position is a matter for conjecture. In ‘After Ten Years’ he was clearly beginning, but only beginning, to think beyond the bounds of his upbringing. It took until 1944 for Bonhoeffer to be freed from Constantinian thinking and to contemplate a church truly free of the state apparatus.⁶ However, Bonhoeffer is convinced that, whether a church is established or not, to be truly free, it must derive its freedom solely from Jesus Christ. Of course, such a church may well need to spend its time opposing privilege and suffer for its stand, but this would be no surprise to Bonhoeffer. But even his ‘view from below’ – where he regards personal suffering as ‘a more effective key ... for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune’ – also contains a warning that ‘we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of “from below” or “from above”.’ The view from below is, it seems, a staging post along the way. He is too aware of the limited role most people can play, or be expected to play, in society.

In his one paragraph in his *Ethics*, where he deals with ‘the individual Christian’, Bonhoeffer says that ‘he [*sic*] is responsible for his own calling and for the sphere of his personal life, however large or small it may be’. Bonhoeffer continues:

According to Holy Scripture, there is no right to revolution; but there is a responsibility of every individual for preserving the purity of his office and mission in the *polis*. In this way, in the true sense, every individual serves government with his responsibility. No one, not even government itself, can deprive him of this responsibility or forbid him to discharge it, for it is an integral part of his life in sanctification, and it arises from obedience to the Lord of both Church and government.⁷

There is no sense here of boundary breaking, or even of expecting the ordinary Christian to be aware of justice done to a ‘higher satisfaction.’ Bonhoeffer’s line here smacks more of ‘know your place.’ It is, for Bonhoeffer, shameful that his church, his nation and *his class* could have failed in their leadership responsibility to oppose Hitler. This responsible opposition is something that Bonhoeffer does not expect from the ordinary people.

3. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Revised Edition, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000). As one example, even in his final prison, Bonhoeffer ‘did a great deal to keep some of the weaker brethren from depression and anxiety.’ Letter from H. Falconer to S. Leibholz, quoted in Bethge, 924.

4. Bonhoeffer, ‘Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge’, in *LPP*, 294-5.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster, 1995), 247.

6. As shown by his ‘Outline for a Book’ in *LPP*, pp. 382-3.

7. *Ethics*, p. 346.

Indeed, in a world where most people appeared willingly to become complicit in the evils of Nazism, Bonhoeffer expected ‘a large part of mankind’ to fall into folly as the result of ‘any violent display of power’⁸. Bonhoeffer is convinced that this folly cannot be overcome by instruction, ‘but only by an act of liberation’ – this again points towards an authoritarian idea of leadership responsibility. This is not to say that he allows anyone (member of the elite or not) to feel contempt for any member of humanity, but the question is whether those in power ‘expect more from people’s folly than from their wisdom and independence of mind.’⁹ This is still the thought of one who is conditioned by hierarchy rather than thoughts of conscientizing the poor. But it must be seen that, from Bonhoeffer’s perspective, the very failure of those with the responsibility to act on it that led to the situation where he found himself – as a Lutheran pastor committed to peace and a member of the upper middle classes inculcated with ‘pride in ... leadership’ – contemplating tyrannicide against the clear command of the Bible that ‘thou shall not kill.’

Conclusion:

In spite of the use made of him by Gutierrez and others, and in spite of the failure of the very people who should have acted, Bonhoeffer was and remained a conservative autocrat who placed more faith in the leadership responsibilities of the appropriate classes than he did in granting individual responsibility to ordinary people. In an age where ‘authority’ and ‘responsibility’ have become contested terms, and where liberation theology has been correctly criticised for lacking a concept of authority, which is at least in part due to its ‘acephalous idea of society,’¹⁰ I submit that Bonhoeffer’s ideas on authority even while he looks at the world ‘from below’ will repay careful critical examination.

8. *LPP*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

10. Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Political Theology, Tradition and Modernity’, in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 245.

Recommended Further Reading:

For a general introduction to Liberation Theology in some of its forms (and to read Oliver O’Donovan’s criticisms), see Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

For a life of Bonhoeffer, in spite of its forbidding length, Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Revised Edition, trans. Eric Mosbacher et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000) cannot be beaten.

For Bonhoeffer’s theology, Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 2003) is a good introduction, though it does tend to read his life back from his martyrdom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s own *tour de force* remains *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) [this is an up to date and very readable translation, I recommend, for background and ‘scene-setting’ that you also read the editors’ introductions and afterwards].

Nigel W. Oakley, a Whitefield grantee, was granted his doctoral degree from the University of Durham on 16th January 2004. His thesis, from which this paper is derived, was entitled ‘Educating Christians for Political Involvement.’ He is currently looking for work, but is kept busy by writing academic articles (two of which have already been accepted for publication), drafting a novel and looking after his two small boys.