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Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ideology, Praxis and his Influence on the Theology of Liberation

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ABSTRACT

This article traces Dietrich Bonhoeffer's transition from orthodoxy to orthopraxy. As his life and thought moved ever deeper into resisting Nazism, Bonhoeffer was eventually executed in 1945 in punishment for aiding plots to assassinate Hitler. I argue that the path that led to his praxis of resistance to Nazi oppression is significantly different from orthopraxy as a 'first act' in the Theology of Liberation which arose later in Latin America. Although Bonhoeffer's work has influenced the Theology of Liberation, I show that his orthopraxy is based on a liberative Christology which, unlike the liberative Christology of the Theology of Liberation, steers as far as possible from political ideology. I claim that, to interpret Bonhoeffer, one must tackle his ideological deconstruction of religion and politics, Church and State. What we discover is a liberation theology based on *imitatio Christi*.

KEYWORDS

Bonhoeffer; liberation theology; ideology; utopia; orthopraxy

Studying the life and works of Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, gives us the opportunity to explore how political ideology interacts with religion.¹ Out of the various branches that stem from the umbrella term "Political Theology," I have chosen to compare Bonhoeffer's views on ideology with that of the Theology of Liberation.² In doing so, we discover that Bonhoeffer was a pioneer liberation theologian through his liberative Christology and theology of resistance. However, we should not confuse the "Theology of Liberation" with liberation theology, the latter itself being an umbrella term that includes various branches of theology associated with the liberation of the oppressed and the poor.³

For Bonhoeffer, Church and State should limit each other in one reality under Christ. And, as Stanley Hauerwas remarks, "Bonhoeffer's work was from beginning to end the

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¹Born in Breslau (East Prussia) in 1906. Executed in Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945.

²For an up-to-date review of the various branches of Political Theology, see Cavanaugh and Scott, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*.

³For example, the Theology of the People that arose in Argentina was an important movement which affected Pope Francis I in his own trajectory against oppression. See Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," 118–35.

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attempt to reclaim the visibility of the church as the necessary condition for the proclamation of the Gospel in a world that no longer privileged Christianity.”⁴ This is because Political Theology in Germany, prior to the second world war, was significantly influenced by Max Weber’s sociology of power, and Carl Schmitt’s kidnapping of theological concepts for purely secular power politics. With the Theology of Liberation that arose in the nineteen-sixties, we find a different ideological anchor, one that comes from the bottom up through base communities of the poor and oppressed.

Bonhoeffer and the rise of national socialism

As Werner Jeanrond claims in his article “From Resistance to Liberation Theology,” before Dietrich Bonhoeffer – and by extension before National Socialism – there was no significant Christian theology of resistance.⁵ I would therefore classify Bonhoeffer’s own Political Theology as a “theology of resistance,” echoing Christiane Tietz’s book *Theologian and Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.⁶ And, Jeanrond tells us, no “coherent theology of resistance” was possible given the ineffectiveness of the Protestant response to Nazism and the Catholic Church’s appeasement policy.⁷ Jeanrond here refers to the rigged elections of the Confederation of German Evangelical Churches and the *Reichskonkordat* with the Catholic Church, both events taking place as early as July 1933. But although Bonhoeffer’s resistance to Nazism is well known, it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that it was a *natural* outcome of his ecumenical outlook, which developed mainly during his year at the Union Theological Seminary in New York (1930).⁸

Bonhoeffer came from a privileged home and a conservative Lutheran educational background. He studied at the University of Tübingen during the unstable environment of the ill-fated Weimar Republic. Notably, his professors included Adolf von Harnack, a friend of the Bonhoeffer household. As a student, Bonhoeffer joined a patriotic fraternity known as the “Hedgehogs” (his father had also been a member), naturally seeking friendships compatible with his own conservative Lutheran cultural heritage.⁹ In this context, I agree with John de Gruchy’s point that we cannot take for granted Bonhoeffer’s resistance to National Socialism, but rather it arose out of a “troubled conscience combined with a sense of deep loyalty to the Fatherland.”¹⁰

From his PhD thesis *Sanctorum Communio* (1927), until his execution at the Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1945, Bonhoeffer’s theology shows a notable transformation which grew out of his resistance against Nazism.¹¹ The heretical proposal of Harnack and the *Deutsche Christen* to eliminate the Old Testament from the Holy Scripture led

⁴Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 138. This phrase was already used by Hauerwas in 2004. See Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 34.

⁵Jeanrond, “From Resistance to Liberation Theology,” S187. Jeanrond defines “resistance” as “opposition in word and action” to any form of “ideological theory and praxis.”

⁶Tietz, *Theologian of Liberation*.

⁷Jeanrond, “From Resistance,” S191.

⁸de Gruchy, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Transition to Democracy,” 347. Bonhoeffer personally witnessed the rampant racist tensions in the United States.

⁹Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, 48–9.

¹⁰de Gruchy, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Transition to Democracy,” 349.

¹¹Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*. Future references of the collection *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* will be abbreviated as DBWE. DBWE 8 has a Reader’s Edition, which will be cited as such whenever appropriate.

to a major crisis within the Protestant Churches. In response, Bonhoeffer and Herman Sasse drafted the Bethel Confession of August 1933.¹² From the very beginning of Hitler's rise to power, Bonhoeffer was an outspoken critic of National Socialist policies, and even Karl Barth later lamented the weakness of his own response to the emerging anti-semitism that was so evidently evil.¹³ Bonhoeffer expected the Protestant Church to call for a *status confessionis* in response to the Aryan Paragraph, but this did not happen. Consequently, he joined the newly created Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) following the Barmen Declaration of May 1934, taking a leading position at its seminary in Finkenwalde.¹⁴ In *Life Together* (*Gemeinsames Leben*, 1939), Bonhoeffer describes the seminary not as a secluded *collegium pietatis*, but rather as a beacon sustaining true Christian faith in opposition to the *Deutsche Christen*.¹⁵

With the closure of Finkenwalde by the Gestapo in 1937, however, Bonhoeffer lost his last bastion of protest. Now isolated, he took the extraordinary decision in 1938 of collaborating with the secular resistance movements against Hitler. Remarkably, given Bonhoeffer's public disapproval of Hitler, the German military intelligence (*Abwehr*) employed him in 1939 in a foreign liaison capacity. In this surreal scenario, he became a clergyman working for German military while serving the resistance.¹⁶ His collaboration in plots to assassinate Hitler led to his arrest and imprisonment in April 1943. His choice to pass over to "action" was not one to bear arms, but to assist movements that did so. Bonhoeffer warned us that "[c]heap grace is the mortal enemy of our church."¹⁷ Now, more than ever, Bonhoeffer entered into the territory of "costly grace," to a level that he could not have imagined in his popular book *Discipleship* (*Nachfolge*, 1937).

The doctrine of two kingdoms and "righteous action"

The closure of Finkenwalde was effectively the culmination of Carl Schmitt's vision of state power, based on Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651). According to Juergen Moltmann "the logical consequence was actually the "full, undivided absolutism of the state," including the internal sphere: *cuius regio – eius religio*, in which Schmitt saw the completion of the Reformation."¹⁸ Schmitt identified freedom of religion as a threat to the State, and thus sought total control of the Protestant Churches by the State, which became Nazi policy. For Bonhoeffer this was absolutely contradictory to the idea that "[t]he world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ."¹⁹ Bonhoeffer consequently began to rethink traditional interpretations of Martin Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms. As Geoffrey Kelly and John Godsey explain, Bonhoeffer's reinterpretation of the doctrine of two kingdoms did not mean the transfer of "allegiance" from Jesus Christ to an earthly lord; Church and State should limit each other in one united reality.²⁰

¹²The declaration was eventually watered down and Bonhoeffer did not sign it.

¹³Greggs, "The Influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Karl Barth," 52–3.

¹⁴See Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945*, 138–9.

¹⁵*DBWE* 5, 38.

¹⁶This was made possible by Hans von Dohnányi, Bonhoeffer's brother in law, who held a senior position in the *Abwehr* and was himself a member of the resistance. For more details, see Tietz's chapter "The Conspiracy Period, 1940-1943" in Tietz, *Theologian of Liberation*, 81–92 (loc. 1500–1690). Kindle.

¹⁷*DBWE* 4, 43.

¹⁸Moltmann, "Covenant or Leviathan?," 19–41.

¹⁹*DBWE* 6, 58.

²⁰Kelly and Godsey, "Editor's Introduction to the English Edition," *DBWE* 4, 9.

But with the absorption of the Church within the Nazi political machine, such a limitation of power between Church and State was a mere illusion. It made Bonhoeffer's idea of the divinely given four mandates (derived from Martin Luther) untenable. These mandates are; work, marriage and family, government, and church. Christiane Tietz says that "according to Bonhoeffer, human beings are to live under these mandates; the quality of their content is given through their directedness toward Christ."²¹ Tietz then follows by saying that for him, "government exists for the protection of marriage and work, but not ... in order to shape them on behalf of its own interests."²² In short, the whole framework of Bonhoeffer's political framework is destroyed by National Socialism.

Even until the publication of *Discipleship* in the midst of Nazi oppression, Bonhoeffer still retained that obedience was essential to faith. Paul Lehmann claims that it appears as if in *Discipleship* Bonhoeffer was "scornful of the world" with his "ultra-Lutheranism."²³ However, as Lehmann says, behind the façade there were already some doubts regarding worldliness and faith. In addition, Martin Rumscheidt notes, Lutheranism became subject to political divisions – a far cry from the social unity of the Church in *Sanctorum Communio*.²⁴ And Eberhard Bethge confirms that Bonhoeffer "had ceased to differentiate between false and true religion; rather he drew a distinction, learned from Luther, between faith and religion – religion coming from the flesh, but faith from the Spirit."²⁵ Therefore, faith represents the whole of reality while religion is but a partial view of the world.²⁶

By the time of his imprisonment, from April 1943 until his death, Bonhoeffer began to consider a different church altogether. In his famous letter of May 1944, written to his godson, Bonhoeffer reveals his hopeful vision:

It is not for us to predict the day—but the day will come—when people will once more be called to speak the word of God in such a way that the world is changed and renewed. It will be a new language, perhaps a quite non-religious language, but liberating and redeeming like Jesus's language, so that people will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power ...²⁷

John Phillips comments that Bonhoeffer was attempting to free himself of the language of ecclesiology because of its restrictiveness and because the concept of Christ as the church community had become "unserviceable."²⁸ Although Bonhoeffer's letter to his godson calls one to *do* the will of God (Matt 7:21), leaning towards praxis, he was entertaining utopian thoughts of God's language overpowering the world as His kingdom draws near. Lori Hale discusses the change in Bonhoeffer's language from 1939 onwards. She observes that by 1942, he no longer saw the primacy of "loving your enemies" and drops this term "almost entirely," in a significant departure from *Discipleship*.²⁹ Instead, Bonhoeffer speaks of "righteous action," which eventually includes his collaboration with the plot against Hitler.³⁰ Hale suggests that Bonhoeffer came to terms with the

²¹Tietz, *Theologian of Liberation*, 87 (loc.1620 of 2705).

²²Ibid., 87 (loc. 1621 of 2705)

²³Lehmann, "Faith and Worldliness in Bonhoeffer's Thought," 39.

²⁴Rumscheidt, "The Formation of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 59.

²⁵Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 66.

²⁶Ibid., 67.

²⁷Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison, DBWE Reader's Edition*, 381–2. Letter 145.

²⁸Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World*, 137.

²⁹Hale, "From Loving Enemies to Acting Responsibly," 84.

³⁰Ibid., 86. See also Lehmann, "Faith and Worldliness," 39.

paradox that Christ died for all, including murderers. Thus, Bonhoeffer wrote his essay “After Ten Years,” offering encouragement to others resisting against Nazism, including attempts on Hitler’s life.³¹ His conscience, it seems, was leaning towards a praxis that tolerated violent action, even if by proxy. But, in fact, nowhere does he directly justify violent action.

Bonhoeffer’s letter to Eberhard Bethge written on June 8th 1944, from Tegel prison, reveals his progress towards the idea of a “world come of age.” He says “it’s becoming evident that everything gets along without ‘God’ and does so just as well as before.”³² According to Peter Selby, Bonhoeffer insisted on an historical path to human autonomy, where the Gospel leads to an understanding that *deus ex-machina* must be replaced by a God who “is truly a suffering participant with the life of the world.”³³ In his letter of July 8th, 1944, he speaks out against the privatization of faith where “holier-than-thou” clergy behave as tabloid journalists, “grubbing around for the dung.”³⁴ Finally, on July 16th, Bonhoeffer phrases his famous words: “Before God, and with God, we live without God.”³⁵ Paul van Buren claims that Bonhoeffer emphasizes remaining anchored in this world with Jesus as the ontological priority as God’s revelation incarnate.³⁶ And in his reference to Matthew 8:17, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that Christ helps us not by his omnipotence but by his weakness and suffering.³⁷

By the time of writing *Ethics* (*Ethik*, 1949) from the early 1940s onwards, Bonhoeffer was well engaged in deconstructing the ideological framework that stood behind a Church absorbed by the State. As Stanley Hauerwas says:

As Christ was in the world, so the church is in the world. These are not pious sentiments, but reality-making claims that challenge the way things are. They are the very heart of Bonhoeffer’s theological politics, a politics that requires the church to be the church in order that the world can be the world. Bonhoeffer’s call for the world to be the world is but the out-working of his Christology and ecclesiology.³⁸

Bonhoeffer increasingly relied on the Christology emerging from his appreciation of the Sermon on the Mount in his 1932–33 lectures. He warned against confusing the Sermon with a new and revolutionary “ethical ideology” that must apply to historical reality.³⁹

Relational truth

Bonhoeffer began to focus his attention on the question of the ego by addressing Luther’s *cor curvum in se* leading to a “self-glorifying solitude” by way of reason turned upon itself, *ratio in se ipsam curva*.⁴⁰ The danger is that theology can fall into what Bonhoeffer saw as the self-referential world of philosophy that is simply an exercise of “bargaining”

³¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years,” in *Letters and Papers from Prison, DBWE 8*, edited by John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 37–52. This essay appears in the “Prologue”.

³²Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison, DBWE Reader’s Edition*, 416–7. Letter 161.

³³Selby, “Christianity in a World Come of Age,” 235.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 444–5.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 464–5.

³⁶van Buren, “Living With God Without God,” 53.

³⁷Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison, DBWE Reader’s Edition*, 464–5. Letter 161.

³⁸Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 142.

³⁹*DBWE 6*, 229–31.

⁴⁰*DBWE 2*, 41, 58, and 139.

with one self.⁴¹ In his Christology lectures (1932-33), Bonhoeffer asks two fundamental questions: “Who are you, Jesus?” and “Where are you to be found?”⁴² Bonhoeffer’s Christology is wholly relational: “I can never think of Jesus Christ in his being-in-himself, but only in his relatedness to me.”⁴³ The question of who Jesus *is* becomes one with where He stands. He is standing “where I should be standing” because I cannot do so in this fallen world.⁴⁴ It is a boundary which I cannot cross, as hinted in *Sanctorum Communio* where he speaks of a “*paradoxical reality of a community-of-the-Cross*.”⁴⁵ In other words, our position with respect to evil and responding through righteous action must be relational and context driven, and this is what we find in his unfinished essay entitled “What is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth.’”⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer introduces a hypothetical case in which a teacher publicly shames a child in the classroom about his father’s alcoholism. The ashamed pupil answers with a lie to protect his private domain. Bonhoeffer concludes that the teacher is doing wrong because he is violating the child’s right to privacy, and this is the “truth” by which God will judge the teacher. Bonhoeffer does not claim that the child did not lie, but that the blame for the lie “falls back entirely upon the teacher.”⁴⁷ Hauerwas states that for Bonhoeffer, “[t]he threat to truth for Christians comes not from the difficulty of developing an unproblematic correspondence theory of truth, but rather from the lies that speak to us disguised as truth.”⁴⁸ Those are the lies which Bonhoeffer feared and which “made possible the rise of Hitler.”⁴⁹ Hauerwas notes the inverted logic in Bonhoeffer’s political thought, where peace must be subordinated to truth, rather than truth being subordinated to peace, which is illusory.⁵⁰

Rachel Muers provides further insight, and considers that knowledge can only be truthful if it is contextually dependent on our transformational relationship with (and in) Christ.⁵¹ Bonhoeffer’s liberative Christology is transformational and not foundational as if tied to a precept of moral duty. It is within this framework that we must grapple with Bonhoeffer’s conscience while facing increasing adversity. His approach to righteous action is moderated by the fact that we cannot know for certain which actions are part of God’s will: “self-justification is quite simply sin.”⁵² Yet he says, “what is worse than doing evil is being evil.”⁵³ Given that we are unable to direct the consequential results of our actions, there is no possibility for us to reason our way into making the right decisions in the face of evil.⁵⁴ Petty self-justification to avoid making decisions and ignoring the call for help from one’s neighbor is ignoring the message of Christ.⁵⁵

⁴¹Ibid., 137–50.

⁴²*DBWE* 12, 303

⁴³Ibid., 314–15.

⁴⁴Ibid., 324.

⁴⁵*DBWE* 1, 151–2. Italics in original.

⁴⁶Bonhoeffer, “What is Meant,” 363–72. The essay is found in this publication of *Ethics*, but does not reappear in *DBWE* 8. Note that the term “relational” does not imply relativism.

⁴⁷Bonhoeffer, “What is Meant,” 330.

⁴⁸Hauerwas, *Bonhoeffer on Truth and Politics*, 14, presented at the Conference on Lived Theology and Civil Courage, University of Virginia in Charlottesville, June 14th 2003, <http://www.livedtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/20030614PPR.04-Stanley-M.-Hauerwas-Bonhoeffer-on-Truth-and-Politics.pdf>.

⁴⁹Hauerwas, *Bonhoeffer on Truth*, 14.

⁵⁰Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords, Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928 -1936*, 168–9.

⁵¹Muers, *Keeping God’s Silence*, 198.

⁵²*DBWE* 6, 167.

⁵³Ibid., 67.

⁵⁴Ibid., 190

⁵⁵Ibid., 136.

There are immediate implications for those who consider the scope of Christian praxis. If, for example, the mechanisms of human governance fall foul of Christ's truth and land at the feet of evil, and the divinely given four mandates are disabled, then the conditions are set to engage in righteous action.⁵⁶ This may even include acting violently against the government. Yet Bonhoeffer does not give himself the cover of self-justification. His actions cannot be justified, as we know from his own writings. Bonhoeffer was clear that ethical principles cannot rest on a single individual.⁵⁷ And his resistance cannot be severed from the millions who died in battle for the sake of their neighbors, and the millions who were sacrificed in silence by the Nazis:

In Christ, all human reality is taken on. That is why it is ultimately in and from Christ that it is possible to act in way that is in accord with reality. The origin of action that is in accord with reality is neither the pseudo-Lutheran Christ whose only purpose is to sanction the status quo, nor the radical, revolutionary Christ of all religious enthusiasts who is supposed to bless every revolution ...⁵⁸

Bonhoeffer delimits our freedom to act within the confines of a strictly liberative Christology but without knowing whether it is good or evil that will be the outcome of such action. This judgement is left up to God and in certain circumstances, an action may be evil but paradoxically serve God's purpose (Bonhoeffer takes a specific example of Judas Iscariot to drive home his point).⁵⁹

Paving the way to liberation theology

As Peter Selby notes, in the decades since Bonhoeffer's death, an increasingly negative awareness of "allowing the experience of European and North American Christianity to be decisive for the future of Christian faith world-wide" has emerged.⁶⁰ In this context, the universality of Bonhoeffer's theology anticipated the beginning of liberative theologies emerging out of a post-holocaust world that spelled the end of colonial empires and the beginning of the Cold War. While the likes of Ayn Rand in the United States prompted radical forms of populist capitalism and anti-communist activism, a "post-idealist theology" developed in Europe and Latin America.⁶¹ In Europe, Johann Baptist Metz and Juergen Moltmann's Political Theology stand out in the face of what was left of human moral standing after Auschwitz, and in Latin America it is the praxis of the Theology of Liberation that stands out, both influenced by Marxist thinking.⁶² Jeanrond identifies both Moltmann and Metz as the main theologians to develop a theology of resistance starting from the legacy of Bonhoeffer.⁶³

Liberation theology arose in the late 1950s within mainly Roman Catholic circles in Latin America. From the first generation of Theologians of Liberation came the much-quoted phrase "preferential option for the poor," credited to priest and theologian

⁵⁶Here we find political theology in praxis.

⁵⁷*DBWE* 6, 220.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 225–7.

⁶⁰Selby, "Christianity," 238.

⁶¹Aguilar, *The History and Politics*, 24.

⁶²Both are influenced by Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch.

⁶³I do not forget Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003), whose important work also contributed to post-war liberation theology, but falls outside the scope of this article.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, who wrote his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation (Teología de la Liberación, 1971)*.⁶⁴ As a socio-political movement, the Theology of Liberation interpreted the gospel of Jesus Christ through the lived experiences of oppressed people. The theological problem that arose, as Juan Luis Segundo puts it, is that in facing “reality,” one must question interpretations of the gospel and contextualize them in the current world, not necessarily from westernized Roman Catholic hermeneutics.⁶⁵ In addition, we must be clear from the outset that liberation theology not only addressed the poor, but also the systematic torture, rape, and murder of political opponents in countries run by dictators. Mario Aguilar vividly described this in his account of events at Villa Grimaldi in Chile and elsewhere, asking the painful question of whether Jesus was present in the torture chamber.⁶⁶ As he points out, an omnipresent and omniscient God must be present in the torture chamber and is also a prisoner of violence. This aligns with Bonhoeffer’s Christology, where the suffering Christ stands in our place. Thus, from Bonhoeffer, through the Political Theology of Metz and Moltmann, we find our way to the Theology of Liberation.⁶⁷

Clodovis Boff outlines liberation theology’s defining characteristics in *Mysterium Liberationis*: “The theology of liberation is an integral theology, treating all of the positivity of faith from a particular perspective: that of the poor and their liberation.”⁶⁸ The Theology of Liberation has a methodological and historical urgency, as Boff notes: “For example, in Europe it is faith that is surely without a safe footing, while in Latin America it is bread that is not guaranteed.”⁶⁹ But although praxis on the side of the oppressed comes first, Boff stresses its theological basis on the “fundamentals of faith.”⁷⁰ Faith is integrated into praxis, the “first act” to concrete action, and here the clergy has a role to play as “organically linked” to, and living within, the grassroots Christian community of the poor.⁷¹ Boff explains that the use of Marxist instruments of praxis for emancipation is to be understood in a methodological context rather than from a political-philosophical standpoint.⁷² And Julio Lois proposes in *Mysterium Liberationis* that it would be wrong to suggest that the road to praxis stems only from ideological principles; praxis connects to the concreteness and hope of the cross and resurrection.⁷³ Quite so, but Lois’ statement implicitly suggests that ideology did not play just a *minor* role in the praxis of liberation. In fact, many Theologians of Liberation were strongly bound to political rhetoric, perhaps explaining why we find only passing references to Bonhoeffer in *Mysterium Liberationis*. We do, however, find Bonhoeffer in an early article by Methodist theologian Julio de Santa Ana.⁷⁴

⁶⁴Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

⁶⁵Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 9.

⁶⁶Aguilar, *Religion, Torture and the Liberation of God*, 1.

⁶⁷Here we begin to deviate from Bonhoeffer’s political theology. We are now outside the spectrum of strictly German academia. Liberation theology became the path to popular and ecclesiastic resistance to oppression in Latin America, heading to a confrontation between the poor and the State, and between liberation theologians and clergy against the mainstream (mainly Roman Catholic) ecclesiastical establishment.

⁶⁸Boff, “Epistemology and Method,” 57. Italics in original.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 62–3.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 67, 73–4.

⁷²We are not to confuse Marxism with outright Communism. Many first-generation liberation theologians, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, had studied in France and Belgium and were influenced by Western European Marxism (e.g., Antonio Gramsci.)

⁷³Lois, “Christology in the Theology of Liberation,” 185–6.

⁷⁴Santa Ana, “The Influence on Bonhoeffer,” 188–97.

Santa Ana's reading of Bonhoeffer concludes that ideology is alienating and should be dealt with only dialectically insofar as it helps to promote "the convergence of human wills around programmes of action."⁷⁵ Glyn Richards moves further and examines the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo, noting the political dimension of collective action in Bonhoeffer's "world come of age."⁷⁶ Here, Richards enters the hermeneutical debate of orthopraxy versus orthodoxy: does praxis define the Christian theology that follows, or does Christian theology define the course of praxis?⁷⁷ Gutiérrez answers this question himself:

Where Western theology assumes that thinking comes before understanding and action, liberation theology argues that action or praxis must be the first movement that then, and only then, can lead to thinking and understanding. However, there is a further condition: this praxis must be done from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.⁷⁸

As explained by Clodovis Boff, faith is assumed as a precondition in this hermeneutic question.

The importance of the "first act" is widely discussed in the enriching contribution by Geoffrey Kelly and Matthew Kirkpatrick entitled "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Liberation Theologies."⁷⁹ Kelly and Kirkpatrick show the similarities and divergences between Bonhoeffer and Theologians of Liberation. To summarize, the convergence is found in Bonhoeffer's liberative Christology which is the principal link to the Theology of Liberation.⁸⁰ But I would highlight as specifically interesting the following passage in relation to Jon Sobrino:

Adopting the language of Bonhoeffer's prison letters, Sobrino argues that God and the Spirit are simply drawn upon as a *deus ex machina* to answer our questions and concerns, but ultimately to move us away from any required action. For Sobrino, this is "cheap grace"—"the greatest danger of Christianity, according to Bonhoeffer." In contrast, the only way to bring about revolution is to return to the historical Jesus of Nazareth and his "dangerous memory." This, for Sobrino, is the key to liberation theology, which he believes Bonhoeffer, amongst only a handful of others, so clearly emphasized.⁸¹

What stands out is the suggestion that revolution can be a possible outcome to Metz's "dangerous memory" of Jesus. It is a memory which lies behind the utopia of liberation.⁸² Metz mobilizes those who have suffered and died unjustly through solidarity and mourning, preventing Christianity from becoming a "paradise for the victorious."⁸³ Yet Bonhoeffer's liberative Christology explicitly *excludes* revolution as an ideological goal and concentrates on "Christ as the man for others."

It is here that we come to the nucleus of Kelly and Kirkpatrick's essay: "Liberation theology stands or falls on the acceptance of this methodological shift, and it has been perhaps its most controversial element. However, do we find any evidence of it in Bonhoeffer?"⁸⁴ As

⁷⁵Ibid., 194.

⁷⁶Richards, "Faith and Praxis," 361.

⁷⁷Ibid., 361.

⁷⁸Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 200–3.

⁷⁹Kelly and Kirkpatrick, "Bonhoeffer and Liberation," 139–68.

⁸⁰Ibid., 145–7.

⁸¹Ibid., 146–7. References to Bonhoeffer come from Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, loc. 2006, 6220, of 8786. Kindle.

⁸²Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 66–67.

⁸³Metz, *Faith in History*, 103.

⁸⁴Ibid., 153.

both authors state, this shift is one centered on Christ's suffering.⁸⁵ It refers to the classical hermeneutical circle, posited as a question of which comes first for Bonhoeffer, orthodoxy or orthopraxy? For the Theology of Liberation, it is orthopraxy which comes first in the context in which it arose and Sobrino, in *Christ the Liberator*, remains focused on the *resurrection* in his discussion of orthopraxy coming first in hermeneutical circle.⁸⁶ Instead, I suggest, Bonhoeffer breaks the hermeneutical circle vertically by recalling the basic tenet that Christ broke into history through his *incarnation*. The emphasis for Bonhoeffer thus lies in our undertaking praxis in faith in terms of *imitatio Christi* (to which we return later). There is no doubt, I think, that Bonhoeffer's liberative Christology alters the hermeneutical circle. Thus, liberation theology "stands" in the context of its origins and, I think, for Bonhoeffer it stands in any context. Instead I would reformulate the question: Is praxis as understood by Bonhoeffer equivalent to the praxis of the Theology of Liberation?

Praxis, ideology, and utopia

Rubén Rosario Rodríguez's "Political Theology as *Liberative Theology*" recognizes that Bonhoeffer's work has served to inspire the evolution of Latin American liberation theology.⁸⁷ He affirms that the modern church as an institution must represent a counterculture resisting oppression. Rodríguez refers directly to Bonhoeffer's call to practice theology from the underside of history with his vision of "religionless Christianity" and finds an echo in Gutiérrez's work, "whose critique of traditional theological language emphasizes orthopraxy as a corrective against ossified orthodoxies."⁸⁸ In his reference to religionless Christianity, Rodríguez recalls this much-debated and popularized term which Bonhoeffer used passingly in his *Letters and Papers from Prison (Widerstand und Ergebung, 1951)*. Rodríguez argues that

academic theology in the First World has missed the mark in understanding what Bonhoeffer meant by a 'religionless' Christianity; according to the liberationists the goal is not secular spirituality—some nameless, vague religious feeling—but rather a theology free from the 'dead faith of the living.'⁸⁹

He refers to liberationist ideals as a "utopian project grounded on an eschatological promise" which embraces Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.⁹⁰ But Marxism is not the core problem for the Theology of Liberation. Rather, what is at stake is the risk of ideological slavery. This, I believe, would be Bonhoeffer's point of view.

An ideology is a system of ideas which provides the framework for political theories and for the formulation of policy. Behind ideological thinking stands the formulation of "truths" that mobilize a particular historical viewpoint. Karl Mannheim defines ideology in his classic work, *Ideology and Utopia (Ideologie und Utopie, 1929)*, explaining that different positions and ideas must necessarily represent different experiences of the

⁸⁵Ibid., 156.

⁸⁶Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*.

⁸⁷Rodríguez, "Political Theology as *Liberative Theology*," 676. Italics in original title.

⁸⁸Ibid., 676.

⁸⁹Ibid., 677.

⁹⁰Ibid., 677. Marx's eleventh thesis proposes that while philosophers only interpret the world, the aim is actually to change it.

world.⁹¹ These worldviews, based on “snapshots” of reality, do not represent the whole. Mannheim sees ideology as inhibiting an understanding of historical reality, because it is self-referential and exclusive. Proponents of an ideology attempt to impose a particular worldview as the dominant one within the society. Bonhoeffer notes in *Ethics*: “Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea. Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God’s grace and judgment.”⁹² It would seem that we have come to a barrier because Bonhoeffer believes that there exists an orthopraxy which is not immersed in a self-referential ideology, while the Theology of Liberation is embedded in a “first act” twinned with Marxist ideology.

In his influential book *The Power of the Poor*, Gustavo Gutiérrez recognizes the pioneering liberation theology that arose out of Bonhoeffer’s struggle against Nazi oppression: “... there are weighty indications that Bonhoeffer had begun to move forward in the perspective of ‘those beneath’ – those on the ‘underside of history.’”⁹³ Both Gutiérrez and Metz are well known for their preoccupation with the privatization of the Christian faith in a post-enlightenment world that is embedded within an apathetic and triumphalist culture. Yet the privatization of religion is no more than ideological kidnapping.⁹⁴ To fight this apathy, Metz suggests we turn to a liberating Christian praxis, yet his praxis remains ideological: “Only with Marx did it become clear that individual moral praxis is in no way socially neutral and politically innocent.”⁹⁵ This suggests that there is perhaps a weakness in *Discipleship*, because Bonhoeffer does not emphasize that there is *always* an ideological price tag associated with discipleship. And in the end, by his praxis of resistance against Hitler, Bonhoeffer paid the ultimate price; his life.

For both Metz and Bonhoeffer, the Christian is still being defined in history, meaning that Christian identity must continuously evolve.⁹⁶ In this constant evolution which encapsulates dangerous memory, Metz did not *ignore* the political but *anticipates* it from the beginning. According to Aguilar,

[t]he works of Metz in Europe and of Gutiérrez in Latin America became catalysts for pastoral models centred on the concept of the ‘people of God’ rather than on the Church as the only place where God could or should intervene within the contemporary world.⁹⁷

Although Metz was not an activist, the Theology of Liberation warmly received his theology, and the affinities were “manifest,” wrote Juan José Tamayo.⁹⁸

Gutiérrez shows interest in Bonhoeffer’s letters from June and July of 1944, and in particular turns to “a world come of age” and a “powerless” God.⁹⁹ Bonhoeffer’s critique of “bourgeois self-satisfaction” and the comment that as a “first step” the church must “give away all its property” to those in need certainly aligned well with the Marxist ideals of Latin American Theology of Liberation.¹⁰⁰ Robert Dean explains that what Bonhoeffer

⁹¹Mannheim, *Ideologie und Utopie*.

⁹²DBWE 6, 225–6.

⁹³Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 231.

⁹⁴In the same way that Schmitt took theological concepts and converted them into secular ideas serving political ideology.

⁹⁵Metz, *Faith in History, and Society*, 64.

⁹⁶Metz, *The Emergent Church*, 163. For Bonhoeffer, see Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 71.

⁹⁷Aguilar, *The History*, 25.

⁹⁸Tamayo, “Reception of the Theology of Liberation,” 47.

⁹⁹Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 180–1.

¹⁰⁰DBWE 8, 503–4.

had in mind was a church which relinquishes its “Constantinian privileges,” breaking away completely from the state and living off “free-will offering.”¹⁰¹ However, I would tend to see this as somewhat of a momentary overreaction on Bonhoeffer’s part, given that he did not focus specifically on the poor but rather identified with responsibility for others in Christ. We might therefore be tempted to see Bonhoeffer’s influence on the Theology of Liberation by a praxis that is not his. And to add to the confusion, at one point Gutiérrez seems to steer away from Marxist ideology and looks to utopianism as his ultimate goal.¹⁰² What is happening here falls under what Clifford Geertz named the “Mannheim Paradox.”¹⁰³

Peter Breiner offers a good definition of this paradox: “Ideologies prevent us from taking advantage of an altered social and political situation either by treating social reality as static and unvarying, or by emphasizing one dynamic of social reality at the expense of others that have superseded it.”¹⁰⁴ This recalls Kierkegaard’s proposal that ideologies include both a promise and a menace, a duality that generates tension through offensiveness. Ernest Gellner represents this duality as fear (or despair) in this world with the promise of salvation in another, creating the tension on which ideology thrives.¹⁰⁵ Such a duality pushes us straight into considering religion in ideological terms.¹⁰⁶ Gellner affirms that ideological truth-claims “propose monopolistic solutions in contexts in which they do not, or do not altogether, monopolise power.”¹⁰⁷ Herein lies Gellner’s criticism directed at claims of religious ultimacy, and particularly of Karl Barth:

What concerns us here is the phenomenology of religion as a form of ideology. The Barthian defence is quite untrue to the facts of the case, to the very spirit of that which it would defend. Logically or not, actual faiths have in fact *both* claimed ultimacy *and* are defended, argued for, from extraneous premises drawn from an antecedent world which is naively taken for granted, as given.¹⁰⁸

Thus, if we accept Gellner’s argument, religious systems are ideological in nature and are subject to the Mannheim Paradox, in that they can only exist within the context of a wider world in which other belief systems can be challenged. As long as faith is embedded within a religious framework, it too becomes susceptible to the weaknesses of the Barthian defense. It should be noted that Gutiérrez himself used the Barthian defense to state that faith does not consist in asserting the existence of God, but to act on His behalf.¹⁰⁹

I come to the conclusion that Gutiérrez’s praxis – as is the case with many Catholic Theologians of Liberation – remains chained to two ideological frameworks; the Roman Catholic Church, and Marxism. For Theologians of Liberation, hope and memory serves two masters; one utopian-transformative in the positive sense, and the other doctrinal-ideological in the negative (dystopian) sense. I would stress here that

¹⁰¹Dean, *For the Life of the World*, 185.

¹⁰²Gutiérrez, *Power of the Poor*, 81.

¹⁰³Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 194.

¹⁰⁴Breiner, “Karl Mannheim and Political Ideology,” 8.

¹⁰⁵Gellner, “Notes Towards a Theory of Ideology,” 75.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 72–3.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰⁹Gutiérrez and Shaull, *Liberation and Change*, 89.

the *content* of ideology is in itself unimportant; far-right ideologies are as damaging as those of the far-left. The core of Bonhoeffer's political theology, on the other hand, evolved into a struggle against ideology in a world where the Church and State are subordinate to Christ's reality. Hence his call for a new world with a new redeeming language. In this new world, faith in Christ overcomes the straightjacket of church orthodoxy. Bonhoeffer's Political Theology is one of refusal to engage with ideology leaving orthopraxy as an expression of Christ's truth and reality at the expense of orthodoxy. Orthopraxy in the Theology of Liberation thus crosses paths with Bonhoeffer's praxis, but they are not equivalent. Bonhoeffer relies on Christ standing directly in his place. By contrast, the Theology of Liberation risks seeking a truth subordinated to an ideological peace, which, as we have seen, is ultimately illusory.

Yet it would be wrong to attribute to Gutiérrez a Marxist ideology at the core of his orthopraxy. As Aguilar says, this has led to a great deal of misunderstandings.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in many instances the associations between orthopraxy and ideology came through particular socio-historical contexts, and the Theology of Liberation did not *begin* as an ideological movement.¹¹¹ In fact, it was explicitly utopian in its vision:

Within the first generation of liberation theologians in Latin America there was a tingling utopian touch that made them take part in many social movements and many Christian reflections on a new world closer to the values of the kingdom of God.¹¹²

So the Theology of Liberation has been drawn into an political battle *a posteriori*, having first started as a utopian projection of faith which does include a liberative Christology.¹¹³ In any case, the Theology of Liberation provoked a negative response from the Catholic Church, and most specifically from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The CDF warned of a radical polarization of faith that could become subordinated to political criteria that depended on class struggle as the driving force of history (IX.6).¹¹⁴ Clearly, the CDF had no problem in finding weaknesses in the Theology of Liberation. In response, Juan Luis Segundo accused Cardinal Ratzinger of covertly wanting to return to the pre-Vatican II era.¹¹⁵ In the end, both the Theology of Liberation and the CDF exposed themselves to the Mannheim Paradox, revealing ideologies and doctrines that do not conform with Christ standing where we should be. But what of Bonhoeffer?

The ideological standpoints of both the CDF and the Theology of Liberation, I believe, would have been unacceptable to Bonhoeffer, who sees *imitatio Christi* as emanating from Christ himself: "Christian people do not form the world with their ideas. Rather, Christ forms human beings to a form the same as Christ's own."¹¹⁶ *Imitatio Christi* is Bonhoeffer's orthopraxy, the first step to liberation. It was, in effect, his utopia and refuge in resistance. Nevertheless, his *political* decision to join the resistance against

¹¹⁰Aguilar, *The History*, 21–2.

¹¹¹For example, the Theology of the People, which influenced Cardinal Bergoglio in Argentina, did not veer so far left towards a Marxist ideology. See Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," 118–35.

¹¹²Aguilar, *The History*, 17.

¹¹³Ruth Levitas demonstrates how the word "utopia" became associated with totalitarianism. She claims this interpretation is wrong because utopias are, functionally, expressions of desires and hopes. See Levitas, *Where there is no Vision, the People Perish*.

¹¹⁴*Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"*. Roman numerals correspond to paragraphs in the *Instruction*.

¹¹⁵Segundo, *Theology and the Church*, 152–3.

¹¹⁶DBWE 6, 93–4.

Hitler eventually exposes him to the Mannheim Paradox. If we accept Hauerwas' explanation that Bonhoeffer was ultimately trying to reclaim the visibility of the church, the risk is faith being filtered by Church ideology. The hermeneutical circle would immediately veer towards orthodoxy. And this lies in contradiction with Paul van Buren's view that Bonhoeffer emphasizes remaining anchored in this world with Jesus as the ontological priority as God's revelation incarnate. Bonhoeffer is conscious of this contradiction. He assumes his guilt and awaits God's judgement.

Yet Bonhoeffer talks of "vicarious representative action" which is grounded in God becoming human through Christ, and only "on this ground" can we consider "genuine responsible action."¹¹⁷ This is just about as far as Bonhoeffer goes to explain his decisions, but it does leave one to doubt if there is some apologetic self-justification. In fact, he returns to the political when he says that the

laws of statecraft do not exhaust the content of the intrinsic law of the state, and indeed that the law of the state ultimately extends beyond any legal definition; precisely because the state is inextricably linked to human existence. And it is only at this point that responsible action reaches its most profound expression.¹¹⁸

Bonhoeffer responds to God's law by following Christ, but I emphasize here that he is aware that he ultimately cannot know if his actions are vicarious or not. I fear that our very human anthropocentricity limits our ability to act like Jesus in a satisfactory way in the practical world. The result of our actions, even if through *imitatio Christi*, inevitably leads us down the path of ideology once we "act," and we eventually fall into the Mannheim Paradox. That *imitatio Christi* inevitably lands us into the Mannheim Paradox is a point that remains to be explored.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy looms large at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Theology of Liberation seems to have lost prominence. Ivan Petrella – as do some of the first generation liberation theologians – considers that it is time to "rethink liberation theology in light of current events."¹¹⁹ Giving a preferential option to the poor is no longer valid because "[n]o class fully embodies history."¹²⁰ Thus liberation theology must move on in the twenty-first century and find new "historical projects." Petrella defines the "historical project" as a "midway term between an utopia, a vision which makes no attempt to connect itself historically to the present, and a program, a technically developed model for the organization of society."¹²¹ Petrella affirms that without any alternative project in sight, capitalism turns into the subject of idolatry and becomes a god.¹²²

By nullifying the poor as a unified revolutionary subject, Petrella strips liberation theology of its constitutive cause. He seems to ignore the work of contemporary charities and missions that put the preferential option for the poor at the center of their praxis. These are not grand utopian projects, but they are nevertheless "building blocks." Petrella leads us directly towards the umbrella term, "Political Theology," rather than to a

¹¹⁷Ibid., 232.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 272.

¹¹⁹Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 3 (loc. 198 of 5488). He began to collaborate with the late liberation theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid updating liberation theology to current events. Alas, there is no space to discuss her significant work on radical hermeneutics and Queer Theology (*Indecent Theology*, 2000). However, *Indecent Theology* could be seen as a departure from liberation theology, creating separate fields of study.

¹²⁰Petrella, *The Future of Liberation*, 6 (loc. 283 of 5488).

¹²¹Ibid., 11 (loc. 411 of 5488).

¹²²Ibid., 11 (loc. 412 of 5488).

concrete liberation theology. He remains exclusively embedded in the political, immersed in the religionless Christianity of the twenty-first century.

Conclusions

The use of Bonhoeffer as an inspiration for liberation theologians is, I think, quite natural, given that his life and work were deeply involved in fighting the injustice of an oppressive ideology. He moved gradually from conservative Lutheran orthodoxy to an orthopraxy akin to that of liberation theology. He stands as a pioneer liberation theologian and could well be seen as a model for other liberationists who came after him, as Jeanrond suggests. Nevertheless, I would not go so far as to say that Bonhoeffer was a Theologian of Liberation given the absence of Marxist influence in his road to praxis. His transformation from below begins with Christ standing in our place. Bonhoeffer sees *imitatio Christi* as emanating from Christ himself. We are first transformed by Christ; this is Bonhoeffer's first and definitive step to liberation, and simultaneously, to salvation. What comes afterwards may be political and revolutionary in its outcome, but the core of Bonhoeffer's liberative Christology is, *as far as possible*, void of any recognizable ideological dimension. Despite his attempts to steer clear of ideology, Bonhoeffer does eventually support a revolutionary coup, and falls into the Mannheim paradox. Yet his underlying ideological framework remains elusive. If anything, it desperately seeks utopian hope rather than dystopian political frameworks and ossified orthodoxies.

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