



Lost in Translation: What Did Bonhoeffer Mean by 'Coming of Age'?

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When I first came across Dietrich Bonhoeffer I admired him for his courageous refusal to go along with the German Lutheran churches' compromises with Hitler. I admired him for holding fast to this stance, even though it was to cost him his life. But I also got the impression he was the sort of liberal Protestant who sat lightly to the key articles of traditional Christian faith. At a lecture on Bonhoeffer some years ago a member of the audience indeed wondered whether he was in fact really a secular humanist.

I thought this was going too far but could see where he was coming from. At first sight Bonhoeffer's famous phrase 'religionless Christianity' does seem to support this view, as his friend Eberhard Bethge conceded:

The isolated use and handing down of the famous term 'religionless Christianity' has made Bonhoeffer the champion of an undialectical shallow modernism which obscures all he wanted to tell us about the living God.¹

Works like *Honest to God*, on the other hand, welcomed this idea and used concepts like 'say[ing] "yes", even if the *theos* is not "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"' and 'recasting the mould'.² Similarly, David Jenkins, in a sermon of 1964, said 'I am quite clear that we are concerned ... not with religion, not with theism, not with Christianity, but with life and truth. ... For myself I am clear enough that life is far too exciting and far too potentially devastating to be concerned with anything else.'³

It is easy to see, therefore, how those regarded as radicals in the 1960s could look to Bonhoeffer's struggle to find new ways of communicating

faith and belief for inspiration. Even Lesslie Newbigin, a more conservative theologian, could write in 1966,

The attack upon ‘religion’ in the name of the Gospel, launched with such power by Karl Barth and further developed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, contains, I believe, a large element of truth. ... The penetrating and yet tantalizing paragraphs in which Bonhoeffer, near the end of his life, spoke of man’s coming of age and sketched the outlines for a ‘religionless’ Christianity are among the most powerful formative influences in the life of the Church today.⁴

For myself, though, that other famous phrase ‘a world that has come of age’ did not seem to ring true either. How can the treatment meted out to Bonhoeffer, to countless others in Auschwitz – or Rwanda or Darfur – be the actions of a people who have come of age? The intention of this article is to show that some of the resonances and implications of Bonhoeffer’s phraseology were indeed lost in translation and that, for him, coming of age meant that humanity was taking on grave responsibilities and risks rather than entering a brave new world. Furthermore, the continuing existence of man-made evil in this world come of age could be seen as a vindication of Bonhoeffer’s words.

It was in fact the chance discovery that the word Bonhoeffer used for ‘come of age’ was *mündig* that has led me to look at that phrase again and to see Bonhoeffer in a different light. In becoming more acquainted with his work, I am fortunate in being able to read him in German, having studied the language to postgraduate level and subsequently taught it. I also worked as a professional translator before ordination. When Bonhoeffer first became known to the English-speaking world it was through translation (HtG p. 23) and the way his ideas were taken up do not always do justice to the original. Although the translations of his work are accurate, there are linguistic reasons why it was received in a way that fitted the agenda of 1960s radicalism rather than that of someone writing in the darkest days of the Third Reich. The

different connotations of ‘come of age’ and *mündig* form an important indication of why this is so.

Traduire, c’est trahir, as a French proverb puts it: to translate is to betray. The problem is that words generally have a range of meanings and associations, which do not always match up when translated into another language. Take, for instance, an ordinary English word like ‘sharp’, which may be used to describe a knife, a person’s intelligence, a musical note, a suit, and so on. Only the first of these can be translated into German by its etymological cousin *scharf*, which in turn has the meanings of rigorous or iron (discipline), stiff (competition) and live (ammunition). For this reason, jokes and puns are the first casualties of translation.

To go back to Bonhoeffer’s references to the *mündig gewordenen Menschen*; this is translated as ‘a world that has come of age’.⁵ On the same page the word *Menschen* is also translated ‘humanity’ in the same context of coming of age. In themselves both are legitimate translations but something has been lost nonetheless. The word *Mensch* (nominative case) has a less abstract feel to it than ‘the world’ or ‘humanity’.⁶ Indeed, Luther translated Pilate’s *Ecce homo* as ‘Sehet, Welch ein Mensch!’ (John 19:5). In everyday speech it means ‘person’ and it is also the word used for ‘man’ in references to the Incarnation in, for example, the Nicene Creed and Luther’s *Kleine Katechismus*. It is therefore a word of flesh and blood in a way that ‘humanity’ and ‘the world’ are not. This being so, the whole phrase has a more personal, individual significance in German than in English and this is relevant when we consider the rest of the phrase.

The hinterland to the English ‘coming of age’ is one of acquiring certain rights and freedoms – to vote, for instance, or to marry. Furthermore, when one looks at the range of 18th birthday cards in any high street newsagent, it is clear that the boundary between freedom and licence is virtually non-existent in many people’s minds on this occasion. The same sorts of cards are available in German shops too but they are more likely to congratulate the recipients on becoming

volljährig (literally ‘of full years’), the term used in everyday speech rather than the more legal-sounding *mündig*. ‘Attaining one’s majority’ would be a closer equivalent and, equally, not a phrase that one finds on greetings cards.

The latter is more concerned with responsibilities than freedoms. Someone who is *mündig* is legally responsible for their actions and liable to appear in court to account for them if need be. This is why the differences between ‘world’/‘humanity’ and *Mensch* are significant. It is easier to visualise a person in the dock or witness stand than ‘the world’. Bonhoeffer is therefore speaking of individual responsibility and actions as much as corporate or collective ones. His *mündig gewordener Mensch* is like the man born blind in John 9 who, being of age, is able to speak for himself. That is to say, he is able to make legal response or to reply rationally.⁷ In this case, to respond rationally and truthfully to the questions put to him leads to the man being put in danger himself: ‘And they [the Jews] cast him out’ (John 9:34), thus sharing the fate of Jesus to be despised and rejected. To come of age, then, for Bonhoeffer implies being exposed to danger. In his letter of 18th July 1944 he writes, ‘It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world’ (LPP p. 122).⁸ Bonhoeffer goes on to name various figures in the New Testament who can be said to participate in this suffering: Zacchaeus, the shepherds and the Magi, the centurion at Capernaum. The blind man of John 9 could easily be added to this list.

The ‘religious act’ that Bonhoeffer refers to here is the confession of sin. Participation in the suffering of God in Christ, he says, is ‘their faith. There is nothing of religious asceticism [German: *Methodik*] here’ (LPP p. 123). Bonhoeffer is contrasting *Glaube* (‘faith’ but also translated as ‘religion’ in certain contexts) with *Religion* (with its stress on the last syllable a more obvious foreign borrowing than in English and a word that tends to verge towards ‘religiosity’, ‘piety’ in its range of meanings). Far from suggesting that these New Testament figures are practising a Christianity without religion or dispensing

with God, Bonhoeffer is saying that they are acknowledging God in their midst in Jesus Christ. In other words the translation ‘religionless Christianity’ has missed so much of the underlying meanings of Bonhoeffer’s phrase as to become misleading and, at the very least, to sound more provocative than the original. In essence, Bonhoeffer is restating the classical Lutheran position on faith and works. Those who have come of age (*mündig*) are those who rely on faith (*Glaube*) rather than works (*Religion*).

The word *mündig* appears at first sight to be derived from *Mund* (‘mouth’) and the line of thought expressed in John 9:21 (‘he is of age, he will speak for himself’) seems to bear this out. However, *mündig* comes from a different root (a mediaeval German word meaning ‘protection’), which survives in the modern legal term *Vormund*, a guardian or legal representative of a minor.⁹ Nevertheless, the confusion exists and in popular speech the related word *mundtot* (from *Mund* plus *tot* ‘dead’) has shifted in meaning from ‘legally incompetent’ to ‘struck dumb’. When Bonhoeffer writes of humanity ‘come of age’, therefore, he is not suggesting that human actions in his day were somehow signs of a new independence or a higher form of maturity. Instead he is saying that the human race is able, and is required, to speak for itself, to account for Auschwitz, Hiroshima and all the other suffering inflicted down to our own day.

In a letter of 16th July 1944 (LPP p. 119 ff.), he says that any attempt to revert to childhood would be at the expense of ‘intellectual sincerity’ (p. 121). The original words are *innere Redlichkeit* (LB p. 150). Elsewhere in this letter *Redlichkeit* is translated as ‘honesty’. The fact that the translator has had to use two different English words on different occasions indicates that once again there is no perfect fit between the two languages. Indeed, behind *Redlichkeit* lies the verb *reden* ‘to speak’ and the noun *Rede*, whose meanings also include ‘reason’, ‘account’, ‘answer’ (as in ‘being called to account/answer for ...’). ‘To revert to childhood’, then, implies not speaking for oneself but relying on the conventional religious language of others, to having a *Vormund* to speak instead. The letter continues, ‘And the

only way to be honest [*redlich*] is to recognise that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*.' The use of the Latin quotation is perhaps to alert us to the fact that the *deus* he is referring to is not the God and Father of Jesus Christ but a *deus ex machina* called to aid 'for the so-called solving of insoluble problems' (LPP p. 93). In this instance Bonhoeffer is writing about the difficulty of speaking about God or of using 'religious' (i.e. theological or pious, the quotation marks are Bonhoeffer's) language in his day. To do so, he implies, is generally 'intellectually dishonest', *unredlich* (LPP p. 91; LB p. 50) and he is challenging Christians to find the means to give an account of themselves. The inadequacy of the terminology of conventional piety (*religiöse Terminologie*/'religious jargon', LB p. 51/LPP p. 93) causes him to 'dry up'. In the same way communication breaks down between the blind man of John 9 and his interlocutors.

In these letters written during the last months of his life, Bonhoeffer struggled with the problem of how the Christian could speak for himself to those who had become *mündig*. Far from regarding a world come of age as an achievement to be celebrated, Bonhoeffer saw it as a new and dangerous predicament for humanity. He comments 'Nun fehlt die seelische Kraft!' (LB p. 83). These words, taken from his "Outline for a Book", are translated as 'Consequently there is a need for spiritual vitality ...' (LPP p. 164), a rather too abstract-sounding rendition of Bonhoeffer's exclamation. Whereas 'there is a need for ...' implies that something to work towards is envisaged, the single word *fehlt* simply expresses the idea that something is lacking, without any forward-looking perspective. Furthermore, the more common meanings of *Kraft* are 'power' and 'energy'.¹⁰ In the original, then, this sentence is almost a *cri de coeur* for humanity's helplessness in the face of its new situation, and to have become *mündig* is to experience the Fall in a modern guise.

In a sermon preached nearly sixteen years before (Easter Day 1928),¹¹ Bonhoeffer refers to the Greek legend of Prometheus, the Titan who appears to get the better of Zeus. Bonhoeffer evidently sees Prometheus as an archetype of humanity come of age (although, of course, he

had not coined the term then). Prometheus' action is not presented as heroic or liberating but 'the final judgement which [sinful humanity] has passed on itself.' Later in the same sermon he mentions another episode from Greek mythology, in which sailors off the southern coast of Italy hear a voice crying 'The great god Pan is dead', which, says Bonhoeffer, is 'a pagan version of the Good Friday message: God is dead, the world is godless, god-forsaken.' Again, he does not present this as a cause for celebrating humanity's liberation from outdated hypotheses but instead says, 'The world appears inevitably to collapse, to dissolve into meaninglessness if God is dead' (p. 75). But, he continues, Christianity has an answer to this predicament in its Easter proclamation 'God is the death of death'.

Bonhoeffer's thinking obviously developed over these sixteen years, influenced by the great events in which he was caught up and to which he would eventually fall victim. We can see that the idea of a world/humanity come of age was present in embryonic form in the 1920s and it took on greater significance during his imprisonment. Nevertheless, his assessment of what this would mean for the human predicament did not fundamentally alter.

While obviously anticipating the desire of Robinson and others for a thorough-going overhaul of religious language, in Bonhoeffer there is little or none of the excitement of the 1960s writers as they broke free from the traditional 'scheme of thought and mould of religion' (HtG p. 8). When it comes to freedom, Bonhoeffer did not link this with his perception of coming of age but with discipline, action, suffering and death. These are the headings of the stanzas in his poem "Stations on the Road to Freedom" (LPP p. 161) and in the last stanza Bonhoeffer could be said to use traditional 'religious' language, describing death as 'Queen of the feasts [*höchstes* – 'highest' or 'greatest' – a rather more earnest expression] on the road to eternal freedom'. Here and in many other instances in his works Bonhoeffer uses the language of traditional piety, often quoting the Bible and familiar Lutheran hymns.

One of Bonhoeffer's own poems has now become part of the hymnody of today's Church,¹² a sign that he has become mainstream for us.¹³ To some extent this is because the Church has caught up with him, but also because his writings are grounded in orthodox Christian belief and employ the language of that belief.

It is sometimes said that the spirit of the 1960s (flower power *et al.*) all went sour in the 1970s (drugs, oil crises, and the Winter of Discontent). For all that this is a cliché, there is some truth in it. When we look closely at Bonhoeffer's language and see what has been lost in translation, it is clear that his realisation that the world had come of age was very different from excited assertions about the age of Aquarius. This re-evaluation of what Bonhoeffer meant by 'a world come of age' means that we can now hear the prophetic voice of a man of faith, speaking to us in words that make sense in a world of 9/11, Darfur and global warming.

- ¹ Quoted in Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 279.
- ² John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 120; 122 ff. [subsequently abbreviated as HtG].
- ³ David E. Jenkins and George B. Caird, *Jesus and God* (London: The Faith Press, 1965), 27.
- ⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM, 1966), 9.
- ⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. E. Bethge; trans. R. H. Fuller; London: Fontana, 1959, c1953), 164 [subsequently abbreviated as LPP]. German quotations are from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Lesebuch* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1985) [subsequently abbreviated as LB].
- ⁶ We can get a flavour of this difference when we consider the difficulties in finding inclusive replacements for 'man(kind)' in recent biblical and liturgical revisions.

- ⁷ See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955), 299.
- ⁸ The words ‘what he is’ are not in the German (LB, 151). The addition of these words dilutes the force of Bonhoeffer’s objection to a works-centred (requiring baptism, and/or penitence?) concept of Christianity. The use of the noun ‘world’ for the adjective *weltlich* once again makes the English text sound more abstract than the original, where the stress in the sentence rhythm falls on *Leben* (‘life’).
- ⁹ *Der Große Duden* (Mannheim: Bibliographisches Institut, 1963), vol. 7, *Etymologie*.
- ¹⁰ E.g. *Kraftwerk* – ‘power station’.
- ¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Das Außerordentliche wird Ereignis* (ed. Manfred Weber; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 73. The translations from this sermon are my own.
- ¹² “We Turn to God When We Are Sorely pressed”, no. 393 in *Church Hymnary 4*. Another of his poems, “Von Guten Mächten” (translated in LPP, 174 ff.) is found in modern German hymn books.
- ¹³ As Robinson had indeed foreseen, although it has taken rather less than the 100 years he supposed (HtG, 23).