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BONHOEFFER ON GOD AND TIME

‘God and Time’: Theological Positions and Philosophical Presuppositions

Christian theology naturally looks to Scripture to formulate its view of God and time. Yet theologians and exegetes concede that the Bible does not speak clearly or exhaustively on this matter. The matter is complex, for our understanding of God’s relationship to time, and hence how we perceive time itself, is closely tied to our understanding of who God is and how God works.

Contrary to our subjective experience of the ‘flow’ of time, the so-called ‘theory B’ view of time¹ declares that all moments in time are equally real, that is their existence in time is continuous and concurrent. It follows that events in time cannot be described as past, present and future, but only in their relation to other events. Thus, we may say that a given event *precedes*, is *concurrent with*, or *follows after* another event. Objectively speaking, there is no such thing as ‘now’. In contrast to ‘theory B’, ‘theory A’ holds that ‘now’ exists, hence events can also be described as having occurred in the *past*, as occurring in the *present*, or as yet to occur in the *future*.

Theologically, adherents of theory B hold that God is totally outside of time. To place God in time would be to undermine his freedom, independence, sovereignty, and immutability. Theory B advocates argue that God, as the most perfect being, is unchanging in his actions as well as his nature. Some would add that he always acts but never reacts, for to the degree that God reacts to events that take place in the universe, he becomes dependent upon his creation. Theologians who hold to ‘theory A’ support their view by arguing that the Bible depicts God as doing different things at different times. Since created reality is constantly changing, God also changes in his relationship to it. Furthermore, he must be present in time to enter into a genuine relationship with his people. As these brief comments demonstrate, the subject of God and time is intrinsically linked to our understanding of the nature and scope of divine foreknowledge and sovereignty in their relation to human freedom and

¹ The following summary of ‘theory A’ and ‘theory B’ views of time is based on Gregory Ganssle [ed.], *God and Time: Four Views*, InterVarsity Press 2001.

responsibility. Related issues include God's 'otherness' and presence, eschatology, and the theodicy question.

Even a cursory survey of major traditions within Christianity gives ample reason to suspect that the position theologians take on related questions often proves decisive for their view of God and time. At a deeper level, a more nuanced reading recognizes the influence exerted on various thinkers' views by the metaphysical and ontological presuppositions that inform their respective theological worldviews.

With all due respect for philosophy, and particularly for the incomparable Greeks, it will be argued here that those who acknowledge the authority of Scripture should first endeavour to let God's Word speak for itself on the subject of God and time, unencumbered (as much as possible) by predetermined dogmatic and philosophical presuppositions. This in turn will provide a basis for biblical theology to engage in a critically constructive and mutually instructive dialogue with systematic theology, philosophy, and the natural and social sciences. This paper argues that Bonhoeffer's view of God and time can serve as an initial yet significant step in this process. His approach offers a healthy critique of rival views of time, which are often marked by overburdened theological systems and/or imported metaphysical presuppositions.

Method and Metaphysics in Bonhoeffer's Theology

Those unfamiliar with his academic theses, in particular *Akt und Sein*, may not realize the importance Bonhoeffer placed on the subject of God and time, nor how deeply his early reflections on this topic influenced his maturing thought in related areas. His position on this issue is integrally related to the central tenets of his developing theology, and even more fundamentally to his approach to the respective roles of metaphysics and biblical exegesis in theological reflection.

Throughout his life Bonhoeffer took a consistent, anti-metaphysical stance. He moved increasingly to criticize Christianity characterized by metaphysics, religion, inwardness and individualism. Methodologically, he sought to answer the question, 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?'; and to consider the task of the Church in a world-come-of-age. What is more, he approached these issues on the basis of a Christocentric biblical realism that focused on the historical, this-worldly character of God's self-revelation in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus his conscious starting point was not located in metaphysical presuppositions adopted more or less critically from Greek philosophy, German idealism, or any other philosophical system, but in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ, in all of its historical, temporal concreteness.

Bonhoeffer saw his own work as a response to modernism and secularism, as well as to traditional religion. He increasingly affirmed and embraced the world in its 'maturity', yet insisted on interpreting it in light of Jesus Christ. His theological point of departure from ethics, which recognizes other persons as subjects via an I-You encounter², is well known. This article first considers Bonhoeffer's view of God and

² *Sanctorum Communio* presents Bonhoeffer's deep theological reflections on this basic insight of personalism.

time in light of his interaction with Heidegger, then explores how his view is related to such typically Bonhoefferian themes as the presence and 'haveability' of God in this world, divine and human free will, providence and human responsibility, and finally the theodicy question. It closes with suggestions on how Bonhoeffer's approach and insights may point a way forward.

The Significance of 'God and Time' in Bonhoeffer's Theology

Bonhoeffer addresses the question of time most directly³ in his *habilitationsschrift*, *Akt und Sein (Act and Being)*. Scharlemann, who points out that 'Bonhoeffer's stated purpose ... was to work out a theological ontology different from the ontological ontology of Heidegger's *Being and Time*'⁴, adds that among theologians⁵ Bonhoeffer alone saw 'the pervasive significance of the question of time in Heidegger's work'⁶. According to Scharlemann's analysis of *Act and Being*, ontological and theological ontologies can be distinguished by the idea used to analyze ontological concepts⁷. For Heidegger, this idea is the care or anxiety (*sorge*) that self experiences in its daily existence in the world. Epistemologically, Heidegger considers 'being in [*sein in*] the world' as a way of knowing the world; hermeneutically, the task is to interpret the language that is there, i.e. the 'talk of the everyday', so as to 'make explicit the understanding of being that it implicitly expresses', which is 'being as *Sein zum Tode*'⁸. To live authentically is to come to grips with the possibility that we can 'not-be'. Existentially, it is this possibility of being *not* that delimits and defines the self's existence as an 'I' in this world.

For Bonhoeffer, the idea that illuminates ontological concepts is God, not conceived of as the Absolute or the unconditioned, but rather received as God's self-revelation in the historical Christ-event. The distinction here between 'conceived ... received' roughly corresponds to the distinction Bonhoeffer (following Barth) makes between human concepts (i.e. religion or philosophy) and revelation⁹. In contrast however to the early Barth, Bonhoeffer stresses that God's revelation is present, not only in a-temporal moments of personal encounter, but temporally in history, specifically in the *kerygma*, the talk about Christ, which is the language of the *Gemeinde* (community). Epistemologically, 'being in the *Gemeinde*', a concept which is central to Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality that is carried over here from *Sanctorum Communio*, becomes a way of knowing the 'new reality' of God's self-

³ Bonhoeffer touches on the subject of time in most of his important works, but deals with it most directly here in his *habilitationsschrift*.

⁴ R. Scharlemann, *Authenticity and Encounter: Bonhoeffer's Appropriation of Ontology*, in: *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Trinity Press International 1994, p. 253.

⁵ I.e. Bultmann and Tillich, other interpreters of Heidegger.

⁶ R. Scharleman, *Authenticity and Encounter...*, p. 254.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 255.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 256.

⁹ Later, in the prison correspondence with Bethge and in 'Outline for a Book', Bonhoeffer overcame the religion - revelation dichotomy through appropriation of Dilthey's philosophy of life; cf. Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, translated by Doug Stott, Eerdmans 1998, pp. 159-160.

revelation in Christ. Christ is present in the community as Word and Sacrament. Hermeneutically, the task of a theological ontology is therefore to interpret the 'talk' of the *Gemeinde*, i.e. preaching and sacrament, to discover the idea of being that it implies. As Scharlemann summarizes:

A theological ontology is not derived from nor implicit in the understanding that goes with *Dasein*, an understanding of being as defined by a can-always-not-be ... it is, rather, a new being in which being in the church as a new self is parallel to being in the world as an authentic self¹⁰.

If being in the world means being unto death, then God's self-revelation in Christ has made possible a new understanding of being, 'which, in some way still to be defined, has death behind it'¹¹. To develop what a theological ontology has to say about being, Scharlemann explores the relation between the self and time. As he notes, not-being in the past is different than not-being in the future. Certain objects, which are *left over* for us from the past, serve as monuments of a time when we were not. In contrast, the radical potentiality of death, which so long as the I exists in the present always remains a potentiality and never becomes an actuality, comes *towards us* from the future, aptly conceived of as *zu-kunft*, or ad-vent¹².

The question posed by Bonhoeffer is whether the existential possibility of death as non-being can be perceived and experienced 'as a moment of time that already belongs to our past?' If the *Gemeinde* consists of those who, as Paul writes, 'have died with Christ', then for Bonhoeffer and Paul alike we are now 'living not toward, but away, from non-being'¹³. This shift from a metaphorical to a realistic understanding of 'dying with Christ' is based on what Scharlemann refers to as an *Entscheidung*, i.e. the decision to base our concept of being on our self-understanding of *neues Sein* (new being) rather than of *Dasein*¹⁴. In everyday life, death is seen not as the self's extreme possibility, but rather as a power that comes to the 'I' from the outside. For Bonhoeffer, the true limit or boundary that defines self is not death, but revelation, as experienced in the proclamation of a new reality that was introduced into history by Christ's death and resurrection. This new reality is experienced in the church, where God's Word is preached and the sacraments are observed. Participation in these events is thus understood as *Sein in der Kirche*. Self-understanding is found not in *Dasein* but in the church.

How does this relate to the self's being in time? Briefly put, the temporality that results from the possibility of death is replaced by a temporality that is beyond death. By entering into the reality given by revelation, death is placed in the past. Although the content of the *kerygma* is past (Christ lived, died, and rose again), its voice is the voice of the future, since Jesus Christ comes to us from the outside as the advent (*zu-kunft*) of the one who was, and is and is-to-come. The historical reality of Jesus

¹⁰ R. Scharlemann, *Authenticity and Encounter...*, p. 257.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 256.

¹² Ibidem, p. 259.

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 260-261.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 261.

Christ, present in the *Gemeinde* through the church's proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection¹⁵, becomes ours experientially as we participate in the events of preaching and sacrament¹⁶.

God in Time: Participating in the Historical Reality of Jesus Christ

If this all seems a bit abstract and theoretical, in Bonhoeffer's view it is quite concrete and temporal. He understood the biblical witness to mean that God entered history (hence, it is assumed, time and space) through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. What is more, this divine self-revelation defines the nature and calling of the Church, and what it means to be a disciple of Christ. As Bonhoeffer programmatically states in *Ethics*, 'the source of a Christian ethic is ... the reality of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ'¹⁷. The reality of which he speaks is that Jesus Christ has reconciled God and the world¹⁸. This is not a formula that the world must conform to, but a process of becoming more like Christ in this life¹⁹. Furthermore, although such formation is first and foremost God's doing, it requires active engagement on our part. 'What matters', Bonhoeffer asserts, 'is participation in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today'²⁰. By reconciling God and the World, Christ overcame the need to choose between this-worldly relevance and other-worldly spirituality. The dichotomy of 'being' and 'doing' is overcome by renewed unity in the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Standing before God, as those convicted and justified, Christ's followers are free to be themselves and free to be God's²¹. As Christ's disciples, their task now is to engage in what he is doing in their church, community and world. In the prison letters, this was reformulated as participation in Jesus' being²², which is 'being-for-others'²³.

Bonhoeffer's grounding of ethics in the church reflects his critique of individualism, and the theology of sociality that underlies his ethical reflections. According to his formula, 'Christ-existing-as-community', God forms those who take on Christ's form into a community²⁴. This community is not a fortress but a beachhead, for Christ entered the world to reconcile it with God. The Church is thus becoming what the whole world is meant to be; not 'religious', but reconciled to Christ and conformed to him. Its task is therefore to address humanity 'in the light of its true form ... namely,

¹⁵ As Scharlemann notes, Bonhoeffer here 'combines a Lutheran notion of sacramental presence with a Barthian notion of the actuality of the word.' *Ibidem*, p. 262.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ 17 Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*, Fortress Press 2005, p. 49.

¹⁸ Cf. 'Ethics as Formation', where Bonhoeffer declares, 'there is no more godlessness, or hate, or sin that God has not taken upon himself, suffered, and atoned. Now there is no longer any reality, any world, that is not reconciled with God and at peace. God has done this in the beloved son, Jesus Christ,' *Ibidem*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer proclaims: 'Christ does not abolish human reality in favor of an idea that demands to be realized against all that is real,' *Ibidem*, p. 99.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 94-95.

²² I.e., the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.

²³ R. K. Wustenberg, *A Theology of Life...*, p. 149.

²⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics...*, p. 97.

the form of Jesus Christ that is its own²⁵. Put more simply, the world should recognize what it means to be human by observing the life and witness of the Church. What is more, since Christ is ‘God-for-us and’ ‘the-man-for-others’, Christians are called to live for their fellow human beings and in solidarity with them.

Bonhoeffer has thus moved beyond *Akt und Sein* to argue that new being in Christ is being-for-others, and that the reality of Jesus Christ is experienced not only in the church through preaching and sacrament, but also in the world through responsible action. Although such action should be seen here as an addition to, rather than a replacement of preaching and sacrament (‘arcane discipline?’), it is a necessary addition, for as Bonhoeffer declared, the Church is only the Church when it is the Church-for-others.

God in Time: This-Worldly Transcendence and Worldly Christianity

Feil is among those who have shown how Bonhoeffer developed his position on the relationship of God to the world in opposition to the stance of cultural Protestantism, which had separated the two largely through a post-Kantian view of transcendence that left God with no place in world, and banished human knowledge and experience of God to the sphere of ‘inwardness’²⁶. Faith, understood by Bonhoeffer as a total response to God in the totality of life, was shut up within the increasingly narrow confines of ‘religion.’ This led to a heteronomous Christianity, which left the autonomous, secular world alone in exchange for its own limited domain²⁷. Bonhoeffer described the religious reaction to secularism’s uncritical accommodation with the world as ‘otherworldliness’, which rejects our God-given but fallen world. Otherworldliness either withdraws from the world²⁸, or strives to create a ‘better’ world by human effort²⁹. In contrast, Bonhoeffer adamantly refused to separate reality into ‘two spheres’, and sought to regain this-worldly transcendence by affirming the presence of God in history and human experience. In particular, this takes place through the ethical encounter of one person with another. As *Sanctorum Communio* makes clear, Bonhoeffer held that such encounters entail genuine transcendence, because God stands behind the encounter between human persons. In the prison letters, Bonhoeffer sharpened and radicalized this insight, declaring that ‘Jesus “being there for others” is the experience of transcendence. Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection)’³⁰.

Bonhoeffer’s approach represents a constructive critique of modernism and a far-reaching redefinition of the world³¹. He argued that Christianity’s opposition to

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 98.

²⁶ E. Feil, ‘Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Understanding of the World’, in: A.J. Klassen, ed., *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, Eerdmans 1981, pp. 239-241.

²⁷ Ibidem, 240.

²⁸ This can take the form of mysticism, quietism, or placing all one’s hopes and dreams in the afterlife.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 241. Typically, this leads to ideological crusades that seek to impose the ‘ideal world’ on the real world.

³⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, New York 1971, p. 381.

³¹ Feil considers Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the world to be ‘the most important of those contrapuntal themes’ he developed against the *cantus firmus* of his Christology.’ E. Feil, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Understanding of the World...*, p. 242.

human autonomy, and its rather feeble efforts to ‘prove to a world thus come of age that it cannot live without the tutelage of “God”³². have only made the modernist movement more anti-Christian. The world has grown up, Bonhoeffer declared, and there is no way back to ‘the land of childhood’. He increasingly differentiated between ‘the abyss’, which he resisted, and ‘the world come of age’, which he embraced. Bonhoeffer characterized the abyss as the world of science and machines, ruled by unbridled reason and technology and devoid of faith³³. He referred to this as ‘hopeless godlessness’. In contrast, he affirmed the maturity and hard-won achievements of the ‘world come-of-age’. He argued that much good came out of secularization, including the benefits of technology, intellectual progress, social gains, and the formulation of basic human rights. Intellectual honesty and rigor have been established as ‘an essential moral requirement of Western humanity’. Reason, science, technology, and culture no longer feel the need to appeal to God or transcendence to explain what remains unknown, and human beings have learned to cope without ‘God as a working hypothesis’ in all areas of life. Bonhoeffer considered it futile, manipulative and un-Christian to deny the world its hard-won autonomy.

Nevertheless, while Bonhoeffer increasingly embraced the modern world, he refused to accept it on its own terms. Instead, he interpreted the world through the person and work of Jesus Christ, whom as we recall is neither a metaphysical idea nor a religious coping mechanism, but an historical reality. He argued that along with the nihilism of hopeless godlessness there also exists a ‘hopeful godlessness’, which by rejecting ‘the God-of-the gaps’ and other false concepts of God, has prepared the way for the true God of the Bible, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, by becoming a real human being, Jesus affirmed the validity and worth of every human being, and of this-worldly life³⁴. Accordingly, his followers are called to live truly worldly lives. Just prior to his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote that ‘the cross of reconciliation sets us free to live before God in the midst of the godless world, sets us free to live in genuine worldliness³⁵’.

Bonhoeffer’s search for this-worldly transcendence has thus led in a more-or-less direct line to worldly Christianity. Since God has entered history (time and space) through the incarnation, it is in this ‘godless world’ that his followers are called to live ‘genuinely worldly’ lives before God. As Bonhoeffer wrote, ‘To live as a human being before God, in the light of God’s becoming human, can only mean to be there not for oneself, but for God and for other human beings.³⁶ He thus takes Dilthey’s philosophically ambiguous concept of life and makes it concrete; life is Jesus’ ‘being for others’, which implies ‘participation in the sufferings of God in the world’³⁷. Speaking non-religiously, this is what Bonhoeffer understood by faith. As Wüstenberg

³² D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison...*, p. 107.

³³ Cf. C. Miłosz’s description of the abyss in *The Land of Ulro*, Carcanet 1981, pp. 168-172.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer goes on to declare that God went on to judge and reconcile humanity through Christ’s death and resurrection.

³⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics...*, p. 400.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ R. Wüstenberg, ‘*Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Tegel Theology*’, in: John de Gruchy, ed., *Bonhoeffer for a New Day*. Theology in a Time of Transition, Eerdmans 1997, p. 70.

concludes, 'Bonhoeffer describes the task of the church today in words that are easy to follow: the church must "tell men of every calling what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others"'³⁸.

God in Time: The Dialogical Character of Providence

Whereas Barth countered liberal theology's anthropocentrism by declaring that God is 'totally-other' and 'free-from-us', Bonhoeffer argued in *Akt und Sein* that the God of the covenant freely 'chose to be bound to historical human beings ... God is free not from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God's freedom. God is present, that is, not in eternal non-objectivity but ... "haveable", graspable, in the Word within the church'³⁹. He went on in *Creation and Fall* to interpret the image of God socially, as a relationship between human persons that mirrors the relationship between divine persons in the Trinity, leading to the claim that 'freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means "being-free-for-the-other"'⁴⁰. In this way Bonhoeffer struck a double blow, first for genuine this-worldly transcendence, and then for human freedom defined positively as being-for-others⁴¹. His assertion that God entered history in the person of Jesus Christ is clearly tied to his view of this-worldly transcendence, and his insistence that following Christ entails a call to a life of freedom and responsibility.

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, "the world come of age" is paradoxically linked with a sense of Providence, in that the Lord of history summons human beings into partnership to fulfill his will in shaping the world⁴². De Gruchy, who called this Bonhoeffer's 'dialogical character of providence ... that speaks intelligibly to those who have "come of age"'⁴³, holds that by combining belief in providence with human freedom and responsibility, Bonhoeffer avoids both 'passive fatalism' and an all-inclusive view of sovereignty that attributes every event to God's prescriptive will. The Lord of history, who is free to work when and how he chooses, invites human beings to participate in making history. As De Gruchy summarizes: 'Man is set free by God to make history *etsi deus not daretur* (i.e., as if God were not involved). There is no guarantee of success; it is rather a calling to accountability and deputyship'⁴⁴. This matches Bonhoeffer's own experience of providence and God's guiding hand, expressed in his moving declaration:

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 71.

³⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 2*, Fortress Press 1996, pp. 90-91

⁴⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 3*, Fortress Press, p. 63; cf. Clifford Green: '... being-free-for-the-other-in-love images God's loving freedom for humanity.' C.J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, Eerdmans 1999, p. 117. Bonhoeffer developed these concepts more fully in *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*; see footnotes 17 and 30. *There was a missing space - between 'for' and 'the'*.

⁴¹ As opposed to a purely libertarian definition of freedom.

⁴² Ch. G. Clarke, *Hope and the Ethics of Formation: Moltmann as an Interpreter of Bonhoeffer. Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1983), p. 453.

⁴³ J. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue*, Eerdmans 1984, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 62. Note that the risk here is taken by human beings, not by God as in open theism.

It may be that the day of final judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future. But not before⁴⁵.

God in Time: Theodicy and the Crucified God

In 1931 Bonhoeffer declared that while God has overcome 'death and evil and sin,' this is presently visible only by faith⁴⁶. However, 'at the end of everything' God will make it visible to all 'by an act of his power'⁴⁷. Rather than explaining evil, Bonhoeffer proclaims God's eschatological victory over sin and suffering. He then turns the theodicy problem on its head, arguing that the issue is not how we are to justify God, but how God justifies the world. His answer can only be 'in Christ,' the Lord who is 'in the world'.

Our thinking in terms of theodicy tries to justify God in the world. But for Christian thinking God justifies the world, and that has been done in Christ. Thus only through Christ do we see the Creator and the preserver and the Lord *of* the World *and in* the world. Only through Christ do we see the World in God's hands⁴⁸.

In *Ethics* Bonhoeffer defended the rights of the individual against Nazi aberrations, which subordinated the individual to the good of the nation. Arguing that God 'stands up for these rights,' often through 'life itself'⁴⁹, he declared that 'the problem of a theodicy that is implied here cannot be solved until later'⁵⁰. Nevertheless, he did define the question; although natural life eventually prevails, what may work out in the long run for the community provides little comfort and less benefit to the individual whose life is forfeit in the short run⁵¹. In 'After Ten Years,' Bonhoeffer once again declined to produce a theodicy, choosing instead to look to Christ, who calls Christians to 'act responsibly ... like free men,' and thus display true sympathy for those who suffer⁵². He writes:

It is infinitely easier to suffer in obedience to a human command than to accept suffering as *free, responsible men*. It is infinitely easier to suffer with others than to suffer *alone*. It is infinitely easier to suffer as public heroes than to suffer *apart* and in *ignominy*. It is infinitely easier to suffer *physical death* than to endure *spiritual suffering*. Christ suffered as a free man alone, apart and in ignominy, in body and spirit, and since that day many Christians have suffered with him⁵³.

⁴⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison...*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, *The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude Toward Philosophy and Science*, in: John de Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, London, San Francisco 1988, pp. 85-97.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 96-97.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

⁴⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics...*, p. 184.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

⁵² D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison...*, pp. 144-145.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

Here human suffering is related to the suffering of Christ, which is both extraordinary and exemplary. Against the backdrop of Bonhoeffer's theology, this makes suffering as free, responsible human beings, who act for the good of others in vicarious representative action, the general pattern for those who would follow Christ into the world. This leads in the prison letters to a consideration of the 'suffering God'.

Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world; he uses God as a *Deus ex machina*. The Bible however directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God: only a suffering God can help. To this extent we may say that the process we have described by which the world came of age was an abandonment of a false conception of God, and a clearing of the decks for the God of Bible, who conquers power and space in the world by his weakness. This must be the start of our worldly interpretation⁵⁴.

God here is revealed not in power but in weakness. Yet God's 'weakness' is neither passive nor helpless. Christ willingly suffered and bore our suffering in free responsibility and vicarious representative action [*Stellvertretung*]. By allowing himself to be 'pushed out of the world onto the cross', Christ became again the center of history, who reconciled human beings to each other, to creation, and to God.

Conclusions

In order to bring to a focus these reflections on the question of God and time (and related theological issues), we might be tempted to ask Bonhoeffer to explain *when God is* in relation to the temporal universe in which we live. If so, we are likely to be disappointed. Just as Bonhoeffer's biblical ontology drives him to ask the question, 'Who is Jesus Christ?', rather than to explore metaphysical questions concerning the 'how' of the incarnation or proposed explanations of the hypostatical union, neither does Bonhoeffer speculate over the being and existence of God outside of time. What matters is that he has entered history in the person of Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of the dynamic, dramatic nature of God's presence and self-revelation in Christ is clearly at odds with those views that locate God firmly outside of time in his eternal 'Now'⁵⁵. Similarly, philosophical approaches to the being or nature of God, which craft elaborate definitions of God's attributes that draw heavily on metaphysics rather than on the Christ-event, are quite foreign to Bonhoeffer's anti-metaphysical stance. His account of the 'suffering God' runs sharply counter to the claim that God cannot change in his actions or his relationship to the world.

Bonhoeffer reads Scripture as a testimony of God's dynamic presence and redeeming activity in this world, and specifically to his relationships with human beings who are called to freedom and responsibility. Though he himself might consider this an unwarranted and unnecessary foray into 'metaphysics', his view appears compatible with the claim that God must in some sense exist in time⁵⁶, or as Bonhoeffer might put it, that he is present 'now and here'.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 122.

⁵⁵ I.e., with 'theory B' views of time.

⁵⁶ I.e., with a 'theory A' view of time.

In related subjects, Bonhoeffer deftly avoided the twin dangers of a (neo)orthodox *salto mortale*⁵⁷ that rejects or abandons the world come of age, and liberal reductionism that capitulates to it while gratefully accepting the temporary concessions granted to religion and the church by the world of science and machines. He combined Dilthey's 'theology of life' with Barth's critique of religion and Luther's *theologia crucis* to produce a theology that still instructs and challenges today. His theological method remains relevant, for it is not bound to a particular historical understanding of the world, whether pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. Instead, it critiques them all through the concrete, historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Bonhoeffer's Christological approach to theodicy, together with his reflections on Christ's suffering, provide a necessary corrective to theologies of glory and power. A God who does not suffer, a Christ who did not go to the cross, would indeed be of no help. But does the famous claim that 'only a suffering God can help' imply that Christ can help only by suffering? As Bonhoeffer himself indicated, there is more to be said about theodicy. We are within our rights to suspect the same might be said of providence and freedom, as well as of God and time. But this is certainly, as Bonhoeffer wrote, a good 'start of our worldly interpretation', which understands Christ to be the Lord of the whole world, not just the Church. It seems justified to extend this claim to affirm that Christ is also Lord of the 'now and here', and not just of eternity.

Perhaps, as my doctoral supervisor Stephen Williams once remarked, if Christ is the Lord of all creation, he can be the Lord of a (humbled) metaphysics as well. If so, it will certainly be a different metaphysics that that criticized by Bonhoeffer, i.e. the metaphysics of *deus ex machina* and the 'stop-gap God'. For those of us who deal primarily with biblical exegesis and/or dogmatic theology, Bonhoeffer's work challenges us to invest the considerable effort required to understand and critique both our own metaphysical presuppositions, as well as those held by our forbearers, to whose work we are all indebted. Once stated, exegetical solutions and dogmatic formulations have a propensity to outlive their philosophical context and roots.

In summary, theology then would do well to understand and critique its own philosophical and metaphysical assumptions in the light of God's revelation. This should lead to a hearty, biblical, Christ-centered view of who God is and what he does, specifically in relation to our world, to his people and to time as we know it. This will provide in turn a robust starting point to engage in, enjoy, and learn from an interdisciplinary dialogue regarding God and time, that involves biblical and theological studies, philosophy, and the natural and social sciences. The extent to which our discoveries and conclusions move from the realm of what C.S. Lewis affectionately called 'pipe and beer questions' into a humbled metaphysics remains to be seen.

⁵⁷ I.e. back to a pre-modern worldview.

Bóg i czas u Bonhoeffera

Streszczenie

Bonhoeffer zajął się pytaniem dotyczącym Boga i czasu bezpośrednio w *Akt und Sein*. Jak argumentuje Scharleman, celem tego dzieła jest zastąpienie ontologicznej ontologii Heideggera opisanego w *Being and Time* (*Byt i czas*) teologiczną ontologią, która interpretuje *kerygmę* (*mowa o gemeente*) jako odkrywanie istoty bytu, co bezpośrednio implikuje 'bycie-w-Chryście'. Naśladując Pawła, Bonhoeffer uważał, że ci którzy umarli w Chrystusie teraz żyją 'nie w kierunku, ale w przeciwieństwie do nie-bytu'.

Pogląd Bonhoeffera na dzieło *God and Time* (*Bóg i czas*) miało wpływ na inne zagadnienia jego teologii. Podczas gdy Barth uważał, że Bóg w swej istocie jest 'wolny-od-nas', Bonhoeffer deklaruje, że Bóg 'z własnej woli wybrał związanie z historycznym człowiekiem... Bóg jest wolny nie od ludzi ale dla nich'. W tym wszystkim Bonhoeffer opierał swoją teologię na Chrystusie; Bóg wkroczył w historię w osobie Jezusa Chrystusa. Postrzegał on Słowo Boże jako świadectwo Bożej dynamicznej obecności i zbawczego działania w świecie.

Wraz z rozwojem swojej myśli, Bonhoeffer zaczął postrzegać Chrystusa, który jest 'Bogiem-dla-nas' jako 'człowieka-dla-innych'. Stąd poszedł w swym myśleniu ponad *Akt und Sein* i twierdził, że nowy byt w Chrystusie jest bytem-dla-innych. Zgodnie z tym kościół staje się 'kościółem-dla-innych', a chrześcijanie są powołani do życia w wolności i odpowiedzialności. Naśladowcy Chrystusa są powołani do życia dla innych ludzi, w solidarności z nimi, tak aby rzeczywistość Chrystusa była doświadczana nie tylko w kościele poprzez głoszenie Słowa czy sakramenty, ale także w świecie poprzez odpowiedzialne działanie. Skoro Bóg wkroczył w ludzką historię (czasu i przestrzeni) w Chrystusie, tam również muszą być jego naśladowcy; ta właśnie świecka transcendencja ma prowadzić do świeckiego chrześcijaństwa. Ludzka wolność stanowi więc integralny aspekt tego co De Gruchy nazywa 'dialogicznym charakterem opatrności' w koncepcji Bonhoeffera; Bóg, który ma nieograniczoną wolność by działać kiedy i jak chce zaprasza człowieka do udziału w tworzeniu historii.

Jeśli chodzi o teodyceę, Bonhoeffer zaczyna od ogłoszenia eschatologicznego zwycięstwa Boga i rozwija swoją myśl podkreślając, że nie jest istotne jak ludzie mogą usprawiedliwić Boga, ale to jak Bóg usprawiedliwia świat (jego odpowiedź brzmi 'w Chrystusie'). Chrystus cierpiał za nas i z własnej woli wziął na siebie nasze cierpienie, czyniąc niniejszym *stellvertretung* (własnowolne reprezentatywne cierpienie) wzorem dla swoich naśladowców. 'Cierpienie Boga' zbliżyło się do nas najbardziej kiedy pozwolił być przybity do krzyża, tak aby to właśnie krzyż na nowo stał się centrum historii, a poprzez to ludzie pojednani ze sobą na wzajem, stworzeniem i Bogiem.