Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Letters and Papers from Prison

The Enlarged Edition

Edited by
Eberhard Bethge

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To Eberhard Bethge

[Tegel] 16 July [1944]

Dear Eberhard,

I heard yesterday from my parents that you had been moved again. I hope to hear soon how you’re getting on. The historic atmosphere sounds attractive, anyway. Only ten years ago we should hardly have realized that the symbolic crozier and ring, claimed by both emperor and pope, could lead to an international political struggle. Weren’t they really *adiaphora*? We have had to learn again, through our own experience, that they were not. Whether
Henry IV’s pilgrimage to Canossa was sincere or merely diplomatic, the picture of Henry IV in January 1077 has left its mark permanently on the thought of European peoples. It was more effective than the Concordat of Worms of 1122, which formally settled the matter on the same lines. We were taught at school that all these great disputes were a misfortune to Europe, whereas in point of fact they are the source of the intellectual freedom that has made Europe great.

There’s not much to report about myself. I heard lately on the wireless (not for the first time) some scenes from Carl Orff’s operas (and also Carmina Burana). I liked them very much; they were so fresh, clear, and bright. He has also produced an orchestral version of Monteverdi. Did you know that? I also heard a concerto grosso by Handel, and was again quite surprised by his ability to give such wide and immediate consolation in the slow movement, as in the Largo, in a way in which we wouldn’t dare to any more. Handel seems to be more concerned than Bach with the effect of his music on the audience; that may be why he sometimes has a façade-like effect. Handel, unlike Bach, has a deliberate purpose behind his music. Do you agree?

I am very interested to read The House of the Dead, and I’m impressed by the non-moral sympathy that those outside have for its inhabitants. May not this amorality, the product of religiosity, be an essential trait of these people, and also help us to understand more recent events? For the rest, I’m doing as much writing and composing as much poetry as my strength allows. I’ve probably told you before that I often get down to a bit of work in the evening, as we used to. Of course, I find that pleasant and useful. That’s all the news that I have about myself. They say that all is going normally at home; i.e. things are not going at all well with Hans. I’m really very sorry indeed about that. I sometimes think that if he had had a good pastor to visit him at the right time, perhaps physically he wouldn’t have had such a bad time of it. I’m glad that Klaus is in such good spirits; he was so depressed for some time. I think all his worries will soon be over; I very much hope so for his own and his family’s sake. H. Walter has been made an officer! I’m now having my books sent from Pätzig to Friedrichsbrunn. I often have to think of grandmother Kleist now; she has become so immobilized. Perhaps we shall be able to celebrate our wedding in Friedrichsbrunn. Maria, too, can’t travel any more after the new restrictions. Perhaps it’s a good thing for her, but it’s a shame for me. Unfortunately she was quite depressed the last time that I saw her; I can well understand it . . . It’s time that we were able to be together.

If you have to preach in the near future, I should suggest taking some such text as Ps. 62.1; 119.94a; 42.5; Jer. 31.3; Isa. 41.10; 43.1; Matt. 28.20b; I should confine myself to a few simple but vital thoughts. One has to live for some time in a community to understand how Christ is ‘formed’ in it (Gal. 4.4); and that is especially true of the kind of community that you would have. If I can help in any way, I should be glad to.

Now for a few more thoughts on our theme. I’m only gradually working my way to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts; the job is too big for me to finish just yet.

On the historical side: There is one great development that leads to the world’s autonomy. In theology one sees it first in Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who maintains that reason is sufficient for religious knowledge. In ethics it appears in Montaigne and Bodin with their substitution of rules of life for the commandments. In politics Machiavelli detaches politics from morality and founds the doctrine of ‘reasons of state’. Later, and very differently from Machiavelli, but tending like him towards the autonomy of human society, comes Grotius, setting up his natural law as international law, which is valid eti.deus non daretur, ‘even if there were no God’. The philosophers provide the finishing touches: on the one hand we have the deism of Descartes, who holds that the world is a mechanism, running by itself with no interference from God; and on the other hand the pantheism of Spinoza, who says that God is nature. In the last resort, Kant is a deist, and Fichte and Hegel are pantheists. Everywhere the thinking is directed towards the autonomy of man and the world.

(It seems that in the natural sciences the process begins with Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno and the ‘heretical’ doctrine of the infinity of the universe. The classical cosmos was finite, like the
created world of the Middle Ages. An infinite universe, however it may be conceived, is self subsisting, \textit{etsi deus non daretur}. It is true that modern physics is not as sure as it was about the infinity of the universe, but it has not gone back to the earlier conceptions of its finitude.)

God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; and the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion (Feuerbach!). For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped, or as far as possible eliminated. A scientist or physician who sets out to edify is a hybrid.

Anxious souls will ask what room there is left for God now; and as they know of no answer to the question, they condemn the whole development that has brought them to such straits. I wrote to you before about the various emergency exits that have been contrived; and we ought to add to them the \textit{salto mortale} [death-leap] back into the Middle Ages. But the principle of the Middle Ages is heteronomy in the form of clericalism; a return to that can be a counsel of despair, and it would be at the cost of intellectual honesty. It’s a dream that reminds one of the song \textit{O wüsst’ ich doch den Weg zurück, den weiten Weg ins Kinderland.} There is no such way – at any rate not if it means deliberately abandoning our mental integrity; the only way is that of Matt. 18.3,\textsuperscript{80} i.e. through repentance, through \textit{ultimate} honesty.

And we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world \textit{etsi deus non daretur}. And this is just what we do recognize – before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34).\textsuperscript{81} The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17\textsuperscript{82} makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.

Here is the decisive difference between Christianity and all religions. Man’s religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the \textit{deus ex machina}. The Bible directs man to God’s powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help. To that extent we may say that the development towards the world’s coming of age outlined above, which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness. This will probably be the starting-point for our ‘secular interpretation’.

18 July

I wonder whether any letters have been lost in the raids on Munich. Did you get the one with the two poems? It was just sent off that evening, and it also contained a few introductory remarks on our theological theme. The poem about Christians and pagans contains an idea that you will recognize: ‘Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving’; that is what distinguishes Christians from pagans. Jesus asked in Gethsemane, ‘Could you not watch with me one hour?’ That is a reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God’s sufferings at the hands of a godless world.

He must therefore really live in the godless world, without attempting to gloss over or explain its ungodliness in some religious way or other. He must live ‘secular’ life, and thereby share in God’s sufferings. He may live a ‘secular’ life (as one who has been freed from false religious obligations and inhibitions). To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man – not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is \textit{metanoia}: not in the first place thinking about one’s own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic
event, thus fulfilling Isa. 53. Therefore 'believe in the gospel', or, in the words of John the Baptist, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). (By the way, Jeremias has recently asserted that the Aramaic word for 'lamb' may also be translated 'servant'; very appropriate in view of Isa. 53!)

This being caught up into the messianic sufferings of God in Jesus Christ takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. It appears in the call to discipleship, in Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners, in 'conversions' in the narrower sense of the word (e.g. Zacchaeus), in the act of the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7) – an act that she performed without any confession of sin, in the healing of the sick (Matt. 8:17; see above), in Jesus' acceptance of children. The shepherds, like the wise men from the East, stand at the crib, not as 'converted sinners', but simply because they are drawn to the crib by the star just as they are. The centurion of Capernaum (who makes no confession of sin) is held up as a model of faith (cf. Jairus). Jesus 'loved' the rich young man. The eunuch (Acts 8) and Cornelius (Acts 10) are not standing at the edge of an abyss. Nathaniel is 'an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile' (John 1:47). Finally, Joseph of Arimathea and the women at the tomb. The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ. That is their 'faith'. There is nothing of religious method here. The 'religious act' is always something partial; 'faith' is something whole, involving the whole of one's life. Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.

But what does this life look like, this participation in the powerlessness of God in the world? I will write about that next time, I hope. Just one more point for today. When we speak of God in a 'non-religious' way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age. Forgive me for still putting it all so terribly clumsily and badly, as I really feel I am. But perhaps you will help me again to make things clearer and simpler, even if only by my being able to talk about them with you and to hear you, so to speak, keep asking and answering.

The address is now H. Linke, Berlin-Friedrichshagen, Wilhelmstrasse 58. I'm very glad that you've now got over the mountain passes. We're getting up at 7.30 almost every night here; it's a bit of a time, and it handicaps work rather.

I hope I shall hear from you soon. All best wishes and faithful and grateful thoughts.

Ever your Dietrich

NOTES

1. After a successful overthrow or the end of the war.
2. To return home from the USA, see DB, pp. 537ff.
3. The German text is printed in Gesammelte Schriften II, pp. 422–25.
4. Geronimo Cardano, philosopher, doctor and mathematician (1501–1576), who gave his name to 'cardan joints' (universal joints).
5. According to an entry in his book of readings one of the soldiers of the guard who was acting as a go-between was killed on 31 March. Bonhoeffer gave a new address. Letters from Eberhard Bethge to the earlier address have been lost.
6. 'I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience, as did my fathers.' I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief.'
7. 'Things into which angels long to look.'
8. 'Surely there is a God who judges on the earth. 'Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail, let the nations be judged before thee.'
9. 'And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not; for behold, I am bringing evil upon all flesh, says the Lord; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go.'
10. He probably means Prov. 24:1ff.: 'Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this.' does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not require man according to his work?'
11. Friedrich Justus Perels, justiciary of the Confessing Church.
12. Corporal Knobloch, a member of the Tegel guard; see DB, P.752.
13. 'New Testament and Mythology', Whitsun 1941, first printed in the supplements to Evangelische Theologie the same year; there is an