
THE VALUE OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL READING OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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Abstract

Following a closer examination of Bonhoeffer's theological reading of Kierkegaard it can be argued that there is more continuity than discontinuity between these authors than originally expected. In spite of substantial differences in historical contexts of both authors, there appears to be theological coherence and continuity that helps make Kierkegaard's legacy more relevant for the contemporary theological-ethical discourses. Instead of considering Bonhoeffer unilaterally as an ecclesiological antithesis to the individualistic Kierkegaard, it might be beneficial to consider Bonhoeffer as a useful interpretive tool for a more robust and contextually relevant understanding of some key Kierkegaardian emphases. Bonhoeffer tried to use Kierkegaard's way of thinking as a potent resource to answer concrete challenges of his own (Bonhoeffer's) time, while not negating but rather developing them in terms of a more complex Trinitarian and ecclesiological thinking.

Keywords: individual, subjectivity, community, church, narrative framework

1. Introduction

Up until recently, Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer were understood and portrayed mostly as two incompatible thinkers. The discontinuity between them was thought to clearly overshadow any continuity or overlaps [1-3]. It is rather obvious that we can find arguments for such asymmetry by comparing their historical contexts, personalities, as well as their specific expressions of ideas related especially to theological anthropology, ecclesiology and soteriology (among others). Joining the recent efforts of the Oxford scholar Matthew Kirkpatrick [4, 5], I wish to propose to consider Bonhoeffer's theological/ethical reflection (especially on questions of anthropology, faith, and ethics) as a potent hermeneutical key for a better understanding of Kierkegaard's legacy. With regard to Kierkegaard, my main focus is on the following works: *Sickness unto Death*; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; *Fear and Trembling*; *Either/Or*; and

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selected passages from his *Journals and Papers*. As far as Bonhoeffer is concerned, I paid special attention to: *Sanctorum Communio*, *Akt und Sein*, *Nachfolge*, and *Ethik*.

2. A probe into the respective historical contexts

Bonhoeffer, unlike Kierkegaard, came from a well-functioning, socially-established family. He grew up without major traumatic events or health problems, spared from any “undertones of angst and foreboding” [6]. He was well liked among his peers as well as in a larger social context. As a Lutheran pastor, he was socially, culturally, and pedagogically active (as a writer, preacher, teacher, pastor, mentor, etc.). Thus, he did not deem it necessary or even beneficial to use the Kierkegaardian ‘indirect communication’ that was meant to be “functioning so as to try and prevent the recipient from making a judgement about what is said on the basis of the communicator’s own convictions” [7]. (In his recent article on ‘Kierkegaard, indirect communication, and ambiguity’ Jamie Turnbull argues for a theological interpretation (and significance) of Kierkegaard’s ‘ambiguity’ in his indirect communication, “in which Christ figures as absolute and transcendent source of necessity” [7].)

Instead, Bonhoeffer intentionally set out to be the kind of ‘reformer’ who Kierkegaard had spoken about [8] – not merely a Church reformer within the ‘Bekennende Kirche’ [9] but, being a double agent of the German counterespionage, also a reformer of the socio-political establishment of his country. (The so-called ‘Bekennende Kirche’ (Confessing Church) was founded following the vision and instigation of Martin Niemöller, a German Lutheran pastor, as opposition to the state sponsored ‘Deutsche Christen’, subservient to the Nazi ideology.) His was the method of direct communication. His emphasis was heavily ecclesiological and his Christianity was a ‘Christianity for this world’, that is, the secularized and war stricken world of the emerging post-Christian Europe.

Bonhoeffer did not identify the main problem of the German ‘Church’ Christianity, at least initially, in the loss of individuality but rather in an excessive emphasis on individuality: either in the form of ethical decision making of the individual (Ritschl’s school), or in the form of a psychological/mystical constitution and needs of the individual (Schleiermacher’s theological liberalism). German Liberal Protestantism of the late 19th and early 20th century had gone on the way of privatization, individualization, psychologization, and moralization of faith at the expense of a liturgical church community, Church tradition, and the overlaps of one’s authentic, Christian identity into the socio-political matters of this world. Faith had become a private matter of an individual. Only after the rise of National Socialism of A. Hitler, which mobilized and manipulated the German citizens based on the principles of racial ideology, it became necessary to re-emphasize the value of an individual – however, not as an autonomous, self-referential subject but as a divinely constituted and endowed *self*, who lives with Christ

(within his visible Body as a liturgical and diaconal community of believers) and through Christ for the other [10].

3. Exploring Kierkegaard's influence on Bonhoeffer

In spite of differences in both, historical contexts and personalities, we can observe a considerable affinity in the understanding of selected topics and terms and we can see a surprising similarity in emphases and goals of their theological and ethical reflection. In his private library, Bonhoeffer had a number of Kierkegaard's works that he enjoyed reading. We can argue this way on the basis of a significant number of marginal notes as well as direct citations of S. Kierkegaard by Bonhoeffer. A full list of these can be found in Kirkpatrick's *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of Religionless Christianity* [4, p. 214-215].

Already in 1930, Bonhoeffer refers to Kierkegaard as a representative of "true, Christian thinking" – that is, an authentic Christian tradition which is personified in historical figures, such as the Apostle Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Barth [11]. Bonhoeffer recommends Kierkegaard to his young (but intellectually gifted) fiancé when in his personal letter to her he urges her to read Kierkegaard as a potent 'antidote' against the poisonous thoughts of Paul Schütz. He literally writes: "take a strong dose of Kierkegaard – *Fear and Trembling; Practice in Christianity; Sickness unto Death...*" [12] On two different occasions Bonhoeffer states explicitly that he is grateful that he can stand "in the tradition of Paul, Luther, and Kierkegaard" [13, 14].

One can see the continuity between Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer especially in Bonhoeffer's critique of the superficial, cultural, institutionalized, 'herd-Christianity' (despite small differences). Both thinkers believed that intellectually sophisticated dogmatic reasoning must not become a substitute for the simple, yet radical obedience to Christ's call: "Follow me!" (Matthew 10.21). In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer summarized what he believed to be the main focus of Kierkegaard's critique of the Danish church, saying: "[Church] must not underestimate the importance of human example (which has its origin in the humanity of Jesus and is so important in Paul's teaching); it is not abstract argument, but example, that gives its word emphasis and power" [15].

Even though Bonhoeffer does not quote Kierkegaard very often – in fact, there are only three explicitly cited works: *Fear and Trembling, Sickness unto Death, Works of Love* – his influence seems to be evident in many key places. On the basis of a careful scrutiny of Bonhoeffer's personal library it becomes evident that in addition to these three cited works, several other books made a significant impact on Bonhoeffer, especially *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. A relatively small number of direct citations does not mean a low level of influence, as Kirkpatrick rightly concludes [4, p. 20]. More decisive are the obvious correlation of their thoughts and the contents of Bonhoeffer's marginal notes in Kierkegaard's books that were in Bonhoeffer's

library. As an example of this, Kirkpatrick offers Bonhoeffer's sermon which he delivered during his stay in London (1934). Bonhoeffer preached on the text from the Gospel according to Matthew 11.28-30. His "sermon revolves around the response of the individual to Christ, of taking hold of his yoke, and following him along the path of suffering," while it seems obvious (based on analysis of Bonhoeffer's thoughts) that "it is with Kierkegaard in mind that Bonhoeffer wrote it" [4, p. 20], even though Kierkegaard is not mentioned anywhere in the text.

Christiane Tietz (Director of Bonhoeffer's Gesellschaft in Germany) identifies in her recent study the following terms which Bonhoeffer seemed to have taken over from Kierkegaard and adapted them: "...individual (der Einzelne), seriousness (Ernst), moment (Augenblick), contemporaneity (Gleichzeitigkeit), offense (Ärgernis), decision (Entscheidung), discipleship (Jungerschaft/Nachfolge), imitation (Nachfolge), simplicity (Einfalt), and the extraordinary (Das Ausserordentliche)" [16].

Both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer valued the distinction between "two kingdoms" (Die Zweireichelehre). Bonhoeffer's 'non-religious Christianity' could be seen in correlation with Kierkegaard's 'knight of faith', etc. They considered the established political-religious system of European Christianity to be a devaluation and distortion of the authentic Christian legacy. Both of them agreed that the main burden of responsibility for this falls on the Church representatives – pastors, bishops, and theologians – while the lay members willingly and often rather blindly followed the example of their leaders.

Bonhoeffer also considered Kierkegaard's attack on idealism to be his key legacy for the religious-philosophical reflection of the 20th century [17-21]. Not only did idealism, according to Bonhoeffer, have a malignant effect on the lives of Christians as disciples of Jesus Christ, but – Bonhoeffer here directly invoked Kierkegaard – one forgets the significance of one's own existence: "Kierkegaard said, justly enough, that philosophizing of this kind patently forgets that one exists" [22]. Idealism deformed not only one's understanding of substantial philosophical concepts but also Christian discipleship, ethics and Christology. The Hegelian idealism was, rather uncritically, received by most 19th century intellectuals in Slovakia, as Dupkala points out [23]. For an insightful analysis of the impact of Aristotelian metaphysical categories on the essence and nature of Christianity, see references [24, 25].

In Bonhoeffer's own words: "Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. ... He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a

destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.” [26]

Bonhoeffer regarded Kierkegaard's existential theology as a better option than any form of abstract or idealistic theology. (J.W. Robbins recently notices Bonhoeffer's affinity to Kierkegaard on the latter's concept of 'subjective quality of truth' [27].) As Tietz rightly observes, “it is the concrete existence of the concrete individual in which the reality of Christ comes to a decision” [16]. *The Concept of Anxiety, Fear and Trembling*, and *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* influenced Bonhoeffer's epistemology in his major theological/philosophical work *Akt und Sein* (1930), as well as his ecclesiology in his dissertation thesis *Sanctorum Communio* (1927). Bonhoeffer's marginal notes in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* make it evident that Bonhoeffer owed much to Kierkegaard for his understanding of the power of the original sin, as well as the concept of 'the moment' [4, p. x]. Besides Kirkpatrick, several other contemporary authors point out similarities and possible direct influence of Kierkegaard on Bonhoeffer, namely Geoffrey Kelly [28] and Christiane Tietz [16] but it is Kirkpatrick who offers the most informative summary of the state of research on this topic in his recent monograph: *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of a Religionless Christianity* (2011). His conclusions provide inspiring starting points for a more complex scrutiny of theological anthropology, the concept of faith, and ethical responsibility in Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, with the ambition to outline possible theological-ethical implications for the present.

4. Case study one - Bonhoeffer's reading of Abraham's sacrifice

Due to the limited space allotted for this type of study, I will demonstrate Bonhoeffer's affinity to Kierkegaard as well as his contextual 'innovativeness' by means of two case studies. The first one focuses on the story of Abraham's almost sacrificing his son Isaac (the main theme of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, [29]). (Pavlíková points out that “in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard describes the nature and forms of anxiety, placing the domain of anxiety within the mental and emotional states of human existence. Living in modern society, human has to face anxiety every day. Kierkegaard's concepts of anxiety, despair, dread and aloneness have become a significant part of his actual life experience.” [30]) Kierkegaard's analysis of the figure of Abraham stands in the background of Bonhoeffer's ethical reflection which eventually lead him to an active resistance against Hitler. We may see an interesting parallel here: the destructive influences of the Danish 'revolution' on the Danish State Church find their parallels in the Nazis' invoking of the German 'Volk' and 'Volkisch Kirche'. Much like their predecessors in the 19th century, the 20th century Christians quickly allowed to be manipulated by ideological slogans that had little in common with the original Christian theological and ethical legacy.

Let us look closer at the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as it is interpreted by Bonhoeffer in his chapter "Discipleship and the Individual" from *Nachfolge* [31]. Here is a revealing quote: "Abraham remains completely alone. He is again completely the *single individual*, just as he was long ago, when he left his father's house. He receives the call as it is given. He does not try to interpret it, nor does he spiritualize it. He takes God at God's word and is prepared to obey. Against every natural immediacy, against every ethical immediacy, against every religious immediacy, he obeys God's word." [31, p. 97]

Besides the obvious terminological overlaps, we may observe in this passage the typical Kierkegaardian emphases on the situation of the individual before God (as an individual subject) and his simple obedience without a systematizing self-justification. We notice a similar thought continuity in the following text: "Abraham receives his son back. God shows him a better sacrifice, which is to take Isaac's place. It is a turnaround of 360 degrees. Abraham received Isaac back, but he has him in a different way than before. He has him *through the mediator* and *for the sake of the mediator*. As the one who was prepared to hear and obey God's command literally, he is permitted to have Isaac as though he did not have him; he is permitted to have him through Jesus Christ. No one else knows about it. Abraham comes down from the mountain with Isaac, just as he went up, but everything has changed. Christ came between the father and the son. Abraham had left everything and had followed Christ, and while he was following Christ, he was permitted to go back to live in the same world he had lived in before. Externally everything remained the same. But the old has passed away; see, everything has become new (2 Corinthians 5.17). Everything had to go through Christ." [31, p. 97-98]

The chapter "Discipleship and the Individual" thus seems to be looking for a new foundation a new starting place for an authentic ethics. It brings to our attention the role and responsibility of the individual who stands alone before God *who meets us in Christ*. To illustrate this point even further, we may notice the striking similarity (though with an explicit Christological development) of reasoning between Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard in the following passage from the same chapter (commenting on Luke 14.26): "Jesus' call to discipleship makes the disciple into a *single individual*. Whether disciples want to or not, they have to make a decision; each has to decide alone. It is not their own choice to desire to be single individuals. Instead, Christ makes everyone he calls into an individual. Each is called alone. Each must follow alone. Out of fear of such aloneness, a human being seeks safety in the people and things around them. Individuals suddenly discover all their responsibilities and cling to them. Under their cover, they want to make their decision, but they do not want to stand up alone in front of Jesus, to have to decide with only Jesus in view. But at that moment neither father nor mother, neither spouse nor child, neither nation nor history cover a person being called. Christ intends to make the human being lonely. As individuals they should see nothing except him who called them." [31, p. 92]

What we are dealing with here, according to Bonhoeffer, is the question of primary and cardinal responsibility: the individual stands 'alone before Jesus!' He cannot hide behind rules or social expectations but must be ready to assume his own, full responsibility. "...those who limit themselves to duty", says Bonhoeffer, "will never venture a free action that rests solely on their own responsibility" [32].

5. The 'contextuality' of the single individual's responsibility

This situation, however, has another important attribute: the context of the individual's responsibility is his 'office' (official, public calling), into which one was legally called and appointed. In the chapter called "Sermon on the Mount", Bonhoeffer asks: "Am I not always myself in my office, too, who stands alone before Jesus?" [31, p. 135] The individual is thus not placed in a spiritual vacuum and left dependent on esoteric-mystical inspirations. The individual lives in concrete, historical relationships and his decision making takes place in the given framework of his office as a specific place of responsibility in the world. He stands as an individual "before Jesus" but he meets this Jesus in faith as the One who speaks to him through the mouth of a brother in Christ's visible Body, the Church. Every single person stands alone before Jesus, along with an inescapable responsibility for oneself. And yet, this is not the typical modern kind of individualism that leads to isolation and the presupposition of which is a robust autonomy of the human subject (self).

Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer warns his readers that despite the previously mentioned dialectical limitation and qualification of what it means to be 'alone before Jesus ... in one's office' one cannot escape the urgency and radicality of the individual responsibility of the *single individual* before God: "Should this distinction cause us to forget that followers of Jesus are always completely alone, *single individuals* who can act and make decisions finally only by themselves, and that the most serious responsibility for those entrusted to me takes place precisely in *these acts*?" [31, p. 135].

It is obvious that, in spite of the contextual rendering of personal responsibility (within a given office as a concrete calling to responsibility), the human subject has nowhere to hide. Even in one's acts of responsibility on behalf of (or towards) other people, one still acts as an individual before God.

6. Case study two – 'Gemeinsames Leben' and the single individual

Bonhoeffer's work *Gemeinsames Leben (Life Together, 1937)* has two common lines of thought with his book *Nachfolge*: (1) the decision of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a Christological interpretation of the teleological suspension of the ethical and (2) the Christological concept of a 'Mediator' between the human subject and 'the other'. Kierkegaard's influence can be traced in both of these concepts.

According to Bonhoeffer, each human attempt at a ‘direct relationship’ between the human subject and ‘the other’ will end in destruction. There can be no escaping from the sinful appropriation of right over the other person. Each attempt at a direct human relationship, even one with the noblest intentions, will ultimately reveal itself as manipulation, disclosing selfish motives of the human agent. Authentic relationship between humans (as independent subjects) is only possible indirectly, as a mediated relationship: through Christ, the ‘Mediator’.

What Bonhoeffer helps us understand better with this kind of reasoning, among other things, is the hidden depth and implications of Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham’s story. If it is true that a truly free encounter of one human subject with another human subject – that is, freed from selfish, possessive passions and idolatrous reliance on one’s own plans, or formally given duties – is only possible through mediation, that is, by means of a full and complete surrender of oneself to God through Christ, then Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham’s story – as understood through Bonhoeffer’s hermeneutical lenses – is not an invitation to isolated individuality, nor to ‘acosmism’, but is rather the establishment of an inevitable foundation for the emergence and cultivation of authentic relationships with one’s neighbours. (Edward Mooney was one of the first researchers of Kierkegaard who favored such reading of the Danish intellectual [33].) Only a resolute ‘no’ to this world and its expectations (ethical, cultural, habitual, etc.) can lead to that ‘yes’ to God and, subsequently, with Christ and through Christ as Mediator, to one’s neighbour. Only when the human subject gives up his right over his neighbour – one’s alleged entitlement to his praise, recognition, legitimization, human affection in its diverse forms, etc. – only then can he enter into an authentic relationship with his neighbour. Only when the human person is willing “to accept the reproach of hatred for humans (odium generis humani/hatred of the human race)” [32, p. 96], one becomes truly free for a new responsibility for another human being. Both, Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling* [29, p. 72-73], as well as Bonhoeffer in his *Nachfolge* (Discipleship) [31, p. 92], invoke in this regard Jesus’ words from Luke 14.26.

7. Bonhoeffer’s contextual interpretation of Kierkegaard

Following a theological and contextual analysis of key texts (appropriate to the topic of our discussion) by Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, we may legitimately argue that the apparent discontinuity between these thinkers should rather be understood as context-induced difference of emphases. While Kierkegaard responded to the problem of the loss of the individual in the herd type of Danish ‘State Christianity’ (Christendom), Bonhoeffer took up Kierkegaard’s cause but felt obliged to respond to the loss of a communal dimension of Christianity, to the loss of an organic dimension of Christ’s Body in its sociological manifestation within the visible church. The German Protestant theology in the beginning of the 20th century was under a heavy influence of Adolf von Harnack and his historical-critical approach, which

considered church unimportant at best, even detrimental for the preservation of 'authentic' Christianity [34]. Bonhoeffer did not think that Kierkegaard would, under these new conditions, have unilaterally emphasized the existential-individualistic dimension of Christianity. Bonhoeffer refers here to Kierkegaard's distinguishing between 'the Crowd', the 'Public - and Community' [4, p. 216]: "In the 'public' and the like the single individual is nothing; there is no individual; the numerical is the constituting form and the law for the coming into existence [*Tilblivelse*] of a generatio aequivoca; detached from the 'public' the single individual is nothing, and in the public he is, more basically understood, really nothing at all."

"In community [*Menighed*] the single individual [*den Enkelte*] is; the single individual is dialectically decisive as the presupposition for forming community, and in community the single individual is qualitatively something essential and can at any moment become higher than 'community', specifically, as soon as 'the others' fall away from the idea. The cohesiveness of community comes from each one's being a single individual, and then the idea; the connectedness of a public or rather its disconnectedness consists of the numerical character of everything. Every single individual in community guarantees the community; the public is a chimera. In community the single individual is a microcosm who qualitatively reproduces the Cosmos; here, in a good sense, it holds true that unum noris, omnes. In a public there is no single individual and the whole is nothing." [35]

Bonhoeffer further substantiated his conviction by pointing out Kierkegaard's remarkable contextual sensitivity with which he approached the interpretation of certain theological emphases of Martin Luther. Thus, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* Bonhoeffer exclaims that "as long as a hundred years ago Kierkegaard said that today Luther would say the opposite of what he said then. I think he was right – with some reservations" [36].

8. Conclusions

Instead of seeing Bonhoeffer as an ecclesiological antithesis to the individualistic Kierkegaard, we should rather consider him a useful interpretive tool for a more complex and contextually relevant understanding of Kierkegaard. Bonhoeffer's appreciation of Kierkegaard grew as he learned to appreciate Kierkegaard's existential individualism as appropriate to his (Kierkegaard's) context. Bonhoeffer was then able to use Kierkegaard in his own effort to respond to the challenges of the 20th century [37, 38], where "a creeping entropy of certainties concerns no longer just the economic sphere but increasingly devours the sphere of culture, values and relationships" [39].

Bonhoeffer's concept of the authentic subject's being *in Christ*, perceived in line with the Trinitarian tradition of the Christian creed, leads the human subject to living freely for the *other*, and for this world. To be *in Christ* means to be and to live unreservedly for this world, while the source of one's identity and the driving force of one's ethical (including pro-social and pro-environmental)

decision making is Christ, present in the message of the Church, within a sacramental, liturgical community of believers. Kierkegaard lacks this emphasis due to his specific historical context, or, more precisely, Kierkegaard did not explicitly develop this emphasis. I contend that this very emphasis is implicitly present in Kierkegaard and that Bonhoeffer himself saw it in Kierkegaard, developing it to address the challenges of his time.

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