

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

“Moral Formation as Transformation: The Contribution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer”

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This essay argues that Bonhoeffer can help us understand moral formation as personal and social transformation. Before proceeding I would like to note three ways in which Bonhoeffer himself might have been uneasy with the topic addressed here: transformation of the religious conscience after the Shoah. First, the term “spirituality” has a Catholic ring and refers to the believer’s journey to God. Bonhoeffer stressed human receptivity to the divine call or divine command, not our journey to God. Second, the term “formation” might have sounded excessively anthropocentric. Formation has a developmental and somewhat Aristotelian, connoting the cultivation of good habits, the shaping of conscience, the inculcation of virtue. This would seem to offend Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran emphasis on the sinful nature of every person and the need to live by grace alone. Third, Bonhoeffer does not seem to say much about the conscience, or at least he has no major treatise on the subject matter, no extensive philosophical account of its structure, no theory of how it functions, no account of its place in practical moral reasoning. Bonhoeffer’s insistence on hearing God’s command and on radical reliance on the divine will seems to make such an account unnecessary. Despite these three points, the question of how Bonhoeffer’s spirituality and theology might inform our understanding of moral formation is a good topic to explore.

Contemporary formation of the religious conscience is often understood in one or more of the following of four approaches. First, those who stress doctrinal and/or biblical morality give primary emphasis to teaching religious doctrines and biblical ethics, to maintaining orthodoxy, authoritative codes, magisterial teachings, and the like. They argue that knowing how to act as a Christian depends first and foremost on having right faith. This approach attracts some conservative Catholics and evangelical Christians. Second, those who advocate character education emphasize knowledge of and obedience to the Ten Commandments, the development of moral integrity, adherence to academic honor codes, and the inculcation in civic responsibility. This approach attracts those of a somewhat Patrician civic mindedness.

Most moral formation prior to the Shoah focused on these two aspects of morality, or on the religious justification, motivation and reinforcement of personal morality. Moral formation since the Shoah has expanded in two directions: tolerance and solidarity, respectively. The third approach to moral formation, the ethic of tolerance, appreciates pluralism, multiculturalism, and diversity, focuses on enforcement of human rights and especially civil liberties, strives for non-violent conflict resolution, censures the evils of hate and hate speech, values respect for the other and is alert to the dangers of unconscious bias, power differentials based on race, class, sexual orientation, and/or gender, etc. This approach especially values autonomy and pluralism.

The fourth approach to moral development generates an ethic of solidarity. It regards toleration (along with moral character) as necessary but not sufficient for moral development. It advocates social justice and peace education that go beyond tolerance toward a full fledged

engagement with others in order to build understanding, communication, mutual respect, and friendship. They regard moral indifference as compatible with tolerance, but not with solidarity. Instead of dividing people, religion promotes the formation of conscience that sees humanity as united in common dignity, shared needs, and joint claims on justice. Solidarity does not seek to erase particular differences but rather appreciates them within a common human unity.

Bonhoeffer can help us understand the value of all four aspects of moral development, but gives a religious grounding for solidarity. It does this in three ways. First, he conceived the human person as profoundly social, as interpersonal, and as benefiting from communion with others. True Christian discipleship, he thought, corrects our individualism. We exist both in our own right and as persons-in-community who are called to be responsible for one another. We thus have come to recognize sin not only as commission, active wrong-doing, but also as omission, failing to do what we ought to do. Bystanding can be morally blameworthy. This view of the person as deeply connected to others seemed to grow throughout Bonhoeffer's life toward the direction of greater and greater solidarity with the oppressed. As he wrote in his letter of Christmas 1945: "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer" (in *A Testament to Freedom*, ed. G. B. Kelly and F. B. Nelson [San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995], p. 486).

Second, Bonhoeffer regarded "others" as "neighbors" who possess equal worth as human beings. Every human being is precious in God's sight and so has a right to be treated with equal dignity. Love of neighbor insists on justice as a moral floor beneath which we may not fall. "The best wisdom is recognizing the cross of Jesus Christ as the insuperable love of God for all people, for us as well as for our enemies" (ibid., p. 285).

Third, Bonhoeffer came to regard God as a God of the oppressed, of the marginalized. God is not neutral with regard to people: God suffers with victims and other marginalized people. Moreover, he insisted that God loves our enemies as much as our friends (ibid. pp. 285-286) – something lost on most politicians today who presume that God is "on our side."

Though he did not use this language, we might infer that the thrust of Bonhoeffer's theology and spirituality was to regard the formation of Christian conscience as a process of transformation or conversion. The need for transformation, and the gap between what Christians profess and how they act, was abundantly clear to him. Christians tend to be inattentive, uncommitted, indifferent. His question is posed to every generation: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? (p. 306) This question has a number of dimensions: Where do we find Jesus Christ today? In the oppressed. How do we find them? Not only by using our eyes but also by using our hearts, minds and spirits. And we can only see the oppressed as we ought to see them if we are transformed to become more authentic disciples.

This transformation takes place on two levels: person and communal. First, transformation is fundamentally about moving from being "men and woman for ourselves" to becoming "men and women for others." Christ was a man for others who would rather suffer than inflict suffering on others (ibid., p. 316), who would rather accept violence than act violently toward others (ibid., p. 320). Christians ought to understand, B held, that any attack on any person, Christian or Jew or other, is an attack on Christ (p. 321).

Second, transformation also challenges the Christian community and church as well as individual Christians. In the *Ethics* he writes: "Formation' ... means in the first place Jesus' taking form in his church" (p. 361). Christian prayer, worship and spirituality ought to serve as key bases of Christian moral formation. The fact that so many pious Christians could have been

bystanders and perpetrators during the Shoah testifies to the need to make deliberate connections between religious practice and moral commitment. The meaning of Christian religious practices like prayer and Eucharist are inherently social and moral but it can and has often been diminished or silenced by powerful social pressures like those exerted during the Nazi regime. The consciences of Christians ought to be shaped to appreciate the four levels of moral development mentioned above – to be grounded in religious foundation, to be dedicated to personal moral integrity, to value tolerance, and to embrace solidarity with the oppressed, the outsider, and the marginalized.

Christian moral formation, particularly in light of the Shoah, has to be alert to the importance of the key distinction between proper loyalty and improper, blind loyalty. The SS motto was “My honor is my loyalty,” and of course the ultimate object of loyalty was to Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s insistence, against this idolatrous pledge, that loyalty to God trumps all other objects of loyalty. We stand in constant need of this message, which is actually nothing more than the first commandment.

Bonhoeffer warns of God’s judgment on human pretensions, self-righteousness and self-deception, and particularly uncritical allegiance to the nation, the political community, or the state. His reading of the conflict between “Germanism” and Christianity can be transferred in our time to the conflict between “Americanism” and Christianity – a problem completely missed by neo-conservative Christians (Protestant as well as Catholic) close to the White House who draw a tight connection between the extension of American power in the Middle East, the advancement of our theory of democracy, and the spread of Christianity.

Bonhoeffer’s engagement in the “church struggle” also points to the danger of uncritical allegiance to the church. The church is divinely instituted but comprised of weak, flawed and sinful human beings, a point highlighted here in Boston during the crisis of sexual abuse. Christian moral formation instills the ability to distinguish between God and the church, divine law and human interpretation, the abuse of power by hierarchical authorities and the servant model of leadership exercised by Jesus. Christian moral formation, in Bonhoeffer’s vein, supports ecclesial power to the extent to which the church is “for others” and not only “for herself” (see “Communion of Saints”).

Moral formation in this vein is not only forward looking but also honest about the remote and more proximate past. “The Confessing Church is the church which lives not but its purity but in its impurity—the church of sinners, the church of repentance and grace, the church which can live only through Christ, through grace, and through faith. As such a church, which daily stands penitent, it is a church which confesses its guilt in the division of Christendom and which knows itself to be directed at every moment to the first of the grace of God. It therefore exists only as a listening church; it is free for listening to the other, which calls it to repentance” (“The Ecumenical Movement,” August 1937) (*ibid.*, p. 147).

Knowledge of the Shoah ought to inspire a collective moral transformation or reformation to correct the deformations that have marred our consciousness. The positive aspect of this moral formation promotes an awareness of the common heritage Christians share with the Jewish people, theological education about the permanent validity of the covenant between God and Israel, and the cultivation of a deeper sense of shared biblical faith. At the same time, genuine transformation has to face up the negative: it must be based on an honest confrontation of past injustices, including those stemming from anti-Judaism, and it can only follow from contrition for the sins of the past, a firm amendment to change, a commitment to make reparations, and undertake concrete steps to promote a “healing of memories.”