

H. van der Westhuizen
Dr. H. van der
Westhuizen,
Department of
Historical and
Constructive Theology,
University of the Free
State. E-mail: hvdw@
ufs.ac.za

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“WHO IS CHRIST FOR US TODAY?” BONHOEFFER’S QUESTION FOR THE CHURCH

ABSTRACT

How can a theology thinking about the church learn from Bonhoeffer’s famous and oft repeated question of who Jesus Christ is for us today? The article attempts to answer this question by tracing Bonhoeffer’s theological concerns that led him to ask this question in what he called a religionless age. In the first section of the article, Bonhoeffer’s understanding of this age will be examined. In the second and third sections, the who-question will be explored in light of the parts of his theology where his Christological imperative gains differentiated contours. This article’s contribution does not lie in the different answers that can be given from Bonhoeffer’s own theology, but rather it seeks to understand the question better. In other words, what does this question mean in a religionless age? In the fourth section, Bonhoeffer’s question will be used as a hermeneutical tool. How can a more differentiated understanding of Bonhoeffer’s question, or the theology underlying this question, contribute to a hermeneutic for being church today?

After all, the most important question for the future is how we are going to find a basis for living together with other people ... (DBWE 8:409).

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last years of his life, Bonhoeffer developed what Michael Welker¹ (2009) finds to be his most important theological questions and thoughts. Writing from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge,² Bonhoeffer asks the question of what Christianity, or *who Jesus Christ actually is for us today* (DBWE 8:362).³ Pangritz has suggested that the question not only forms the starting point of Bonhoeffer’s new theological insights, but is also “the *cantus firmus* of Bonhoeffer’s theological development from the beginning to the end” (Pangritz 1999:134).⁴

Bonhoeffer, however, asks this question in what he presumes to be an approach of a “religionless age”, reiterating that “even those who honestly

1 In an interview with *Soundings*, Welker (1996) stated that he is particularly influenced by Bonhoeffer, even more so than by Barth, with whose theology he has been associated. Bonhoeffer’s influence is particularly evident in his more recently published *God the revealed: Christology* (Welker 2013). His Christology can even be described as an answer to Bonhoeffer’s question of who Jesus Christ is for us today (Van der Westhuizen 2015). Cf. also Welker’s Horace De Y. Lentz Memorial Lecture at the Harvard Divinity School with the title reflecting Bonhoeffer’s question (Welker 2002).

2 See Bethge (2000:853-892).

3 This, of course, is not a new question for South Africans. Botman (1994), for example, did his doctoral research on Bonhoeffer’s theology of discipleship and its relevance for a theology of transformation. He also asked specifically as to who Jesus-Christ-as-community is for us in South Africa today, asking as to the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s theology of community for broader South African communities (Botman 1997a; 1997b). Over the years, several theologians with a particular interest in the church in difficult times in South Africa have asked the question of Bonhoeffer’s relevance for South African church communities. In his dissertation, De Gruchy (1972) focused on the dynamic structure of the church in a comparison between the theologies of Barth and Bonhoeffer. Botha (1989) asked as to the role of confession and vicarious representative action, an interest stimulated by the declaration of a *status confessionis* by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, and the reaction of the Dutch Reformed Church. Anthonissen (1993) focused on the credibility of the church in Bonhoeffer’s theology. More recently he asked as to Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on a credible church today, focusing on “a church who is not afraid to embrace the apostolic tradition, that proclaims Christ as Lord and center of the universe” (Anthonissen 2016:17-22); a “church who dares, on behalf of the world, to be an alternative community” (Anthonissen 2016:23-29), and a “church that keeps a delicate balance between ... the search for justice and the necessity to pray” (Anthonissen 2016:29-35).

4 See also Pangritz’s (2000) exploration of the complex relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer.

describe themselves as ‘religious’ aren’t really practicing that at all”. In fact, “they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’” (DBWE 8:362).

In *A theology of life* (1998), an in-depth exploration of Bonhoeffer’s concept of religionless Christianity, Wüstenberg argued that Bonhoeffer attached several meanings to the concept of “religion”.⁵ He showed how Bonhoeffer in a non-systematic way moved from a more positive evaluation of religion to a critique of religion, indeed to a religionlessness and an inquiry into nonreligious interpretation.

What does he mean by this religionlessness, by this world come of age, by nonreligious interpretation?

This is not an easy question to answer, as Bonhoeffer himself is not clear as to what he means. From different fragments in his famous *Letters and papers from prison*, however, it is possible to discern what he might have meant. Bonhoeffer describes a particular time in which people are no longer able to wear the garb of the religion of Christianity: “If this garb has looked very different in different ages”, what then is “religionless Christianity” (DBWE 8:363)?

If we are approaching a complete absence of religion, what would that mean for the church? What does church mean in a religionless world? How do we go about being “‘religionless-worldly’ Christians”? How do we speak about God *in* the world, in a “worldly way”? How do we talk about God, the foundation for any conceptualisation of the church, without religion?

5 For a conceptualisation of religionlessness and a world come of age, see Wüstenberg (1997:57-71), who is editor of the series *International Bonhoeffer Interpretations*, which mostly consists of conference proceedings of the annual International Bonhoeffer Colloquia, organised, *inter alia*, by Wüstenberg. Of particular interest is the first edition in the series, *Religion, religionlessness and contemporary Western culture*, edited by Wüstenberg and Plant (2008). Plant wrote an introduction to Bonhoeffer (2004) in the *Outstanding Christian thinkers* series. See also, in this regard, Selby’s (1999:226-245) work on Christianity in a world come of age. In his research on the language of faith and the debt of the world, Selby (1997a; 1997b:20-38) uses Bonhoeffer’s mentioned question in the second chapter. For introductory remarks on Bonhoeffer’s critique of religion, see also member of the Editorial Board of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Barry Harvey. For him, “Bonhoeffer’s criticism of religion ... provides an important point of departure” (Harvey 1994:39), precisely also for grappling with Bonhoeffer’s conceptualisation of the profound worldliness of Christianity (Harvey 2016). See also an interview with Harvey on Bonhoeffer and the worldliness of Christianity at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUSesayiaCg>.

Bonhoeffer thus also further develops his already present critique of “religion”. “The Christian”, he writes, “is not a homo religious but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being” (DBWE 8:541). This critique of religion is also particularly clear where, in a diary, he critically reflected on a church service in New York, as “a discreet, opulent, self-satisfied celebration of religion”. “Do the people really not know”, he asked, “that one can do as well or better without ‘religion?’” (DBWE 15:224).

He links religion and the inability to really see the Christ of the Bible. In a reflection on Protestantism in America, he emphasised that “the failure in Christology is characteristic of all current American theology”, which essentially is “still religion” (DBWE 15:460).

It is precisely by getting rid of this religion that Christ can actually be discerned. The development toward this age has cleared the way by removing “a false notion of God”, in the fact that the age liberates us “to see the God of the Bible” (DBWE 8:480). Thus Clements (2010:47) argued that, for Bonhoeffer, religionlessness, the world come of age, nonreligious interpretation is “neither the end of faith nor of God”. It is rather an “opportunity to rediscover the truly biblical God”.⁶

Thus, if Christ is no longer an “object of religion”, if he is “something else entirely”, in fact, if he is “truly lord of the world” (DBWE 8:362-364, my italics), what does that mean for the church today?

For Bonhoeffer, getting rid of the garb is to move away from *metaphysical* concepts of God. To get rid of “metaphysics” (DBWE 8:373) is to rid theology of “conceptions and ideas of God held in abstract theism”, which infers “an entity that from within ‘transcendence’ determines everything” (Welker 2013:26). He thus wants to recognise God not in the beyond, but in the midst of life, a beyond *in* the midst of the world.

He also wants to move away from *subjectivist* concepts of God, where God is related merely to the “individualistic question” (DBWE 8:373). The fact that God is being pushed out of the world, away from the public, he reiterates, “has led to an attempt to hang on to God at least in the realm of the ‘personal’, the ‘inner life’, the ‘private sphere’”. “God”, he sets forth, “should not be smuggled in somewhere, in the very last, secret place that is left” (DBWE 8:455). He criticises “the concepts and ideas of God

6 Clements is a member of the editorial board of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* in English and editor of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 13*. He also wrote on theology, nationalism (1999) and patriotism (2011), the question of “our own” as challenge for Christians in dialogue with the ecumenical witness of Bonhoeffer.

rooted in a person's 'innermost' subjectivity".⁷ In fact, he is attacking "a form of intellectual piety that, by referencing a religious core inhering in every person and preceding all experience, is appealing to each person's inwardness and conscience" (Welker 2013:26).

Bonhoeffer furthermore wants to move away from a God of *the gaps*. Religious people, he says, talk of God when they have reached their limits, "at a point where human knowledge is at an end". They talk of God when they do not want to think any further, in fact, "when they're too lazy to think further". According to him, God is merely a "*deus ex machina*" brought onto the scene, "either to appear to solve insoluble problems" or to "provide strength when human powers fail". It is inevitable that this God only lasts until "human beings become powerful enough to push the boundaries a bit further". Human beings merely left room for God in case they might need this God again, "only out of anxiety" (DBWE 8:366-367). In this way, they allowed God "to become a merely marginal figure, a fringe phenomenon at the boundaries" (Welker 2013:26).

In this article, it will be argued that a differentiated understanding of Bonhoeffer's question of who Christ is for us today, developed in light of his Christological imperative, might assist the church to recognise the reality of Christ *in the midst of the world*. The question asked is thus neither supposed to give the church a clear-cut answer to the question, nor intended to show the church what church ought to be. The question rather asks how the differentiated confrontation implicit in the question conforms the church to Christ's *gestalt* in the world ever anew.

It is interesting that Bonhoeffer, in what was to be his last book, was "eager to attempt for once to express certain things simply and clearly" precisely to "be of some service *for the future of the church*" (DBWE 8:504, my italics).

Although we cannot determine the future of the church, he wrote in a letter to Ruth Roberta Stahlberg, we can "at least avoid hindering and destroying that new thing that perhaps is emerging". The church should limit its task from the outset. Even though we are not the ones who form or even reform the church, "we are indeed very capable of blocking the way if God has decided to renew it". He reiterates that "we cannot simply approach the matter with whatever preconceived standards we may have, however creative or widely accepted". In the church, there is no room for Christ *and* our preconceived notions of reform. Strictly speaking,

7 For an in-depth interpretation of this subjectivist faith today, see Welker (2013:39-47).

there is room "*only* for Jesus Christ, and in Christ - truly only in Christ!" (DBWE 16:37-38, my italics).

Therefore, church reform will depend "quite simply from daily intimacy" with Jesus Christ. "This", he writes, "is the depth from which a word must come if it is to carry weight". It is only when we daily align ourselves to "the image of Jesus Christ", only when we "allow ourselves to be called to conversion", that we can be released "from the terrible danger of empty spiritual verbosity" (DBWE 16:38, 41).

For Bonhoeffer, the church would thus have to consistently ask the who-question. Godsey, who was the first to do an in-depth dissertation on Bonhoeffer's theology (1965, recently republished in 2015), argued that this is the question Bonhoeffer keeps asking to the church. Answering this question will liberate "the church from irrelevance" (Godsey 1965:11).

Who, is He, today?

2. WHO ... TODAY?

While recognising the discontinuity, the continuity of this question with his earlier thought has often been recognised.⁸ Already in his early theology, the inherent hermeneutic potential of the who-question is clear.

The intention in this section of the article is not to summarise the arguments of Bonhoeffer's early writings, but to show how the *questions* that concern him already in his early work shed light on the who-question.

8 The currently Bonhoeffer Chair Scholar at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and editor of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vols. 1 and 10*, Clifford Green (1999a:5; 1999b:113), in his authoritative exploration of Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality, for example, described this academic period to lay the systematic "foundations which, while supporting later creative building, continued to shape and characterize his theology to the end". Clements (2010) describes persistent themes, continuities, new configurations and new elements with his earlier theology. More recently, Gaylon Barker, president of the International Bonhoeffer Society's English language section and editor of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 14*, who wrote the foreword to the new edition of Godsey's famous work (1960/2015), states: "When attention is paid to his early writings, what is discovered in his later writings ... is not a radical departure, but the logical working out of the concepts and ideas that had been introduced earlier" (Barker 2015:152).

De Gruchy (1988:4) writes that “Bonhoeffer’s early theology provides a key building block for what follows, and is influential in his thought to the end”.⁹

The *question* of Christology, although merely in latent form, is already present in his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*. This is the case not only because Bonhoeffer’s Christological imperative is clear, but because already in this instance the confrontation inherent in the who-question is delineated. Bonhoeffer asks how we can “arrive at the other as independent subject?” and answers by saying that “there is no cognitive way” to do so. The problem inherent in all cognitive “methods” is that “I bear within me the forms of the mind”, allowing me to get a grip on the so-called other, and for that reason the other is not *other*, is not “alien I” (DBWE 1:45, my italics).

In “Jesus Christ and the essence of Christianity”, a lecture given to his congregation in Barcelona,¹⁰ his question was

whether in our own day Christ still stands in the place where decisions are made concerning the most profound matters we are facing, namely, concerning our own lives and the life of our people.

In line with the inherent hermeneutic of the who-question, he wanted to examine “whether Christ can still speak to us concerning the ultimate, final, decisive matters” (DBWE 10:343).

In his Inaugural Lecture,¹¹ “The anthropological question in contemporary Philosophy and Theology”, what is later implied with his who-question becomes clearer when he states that the question in philosophy about human beings “is ultimately always posed such” that they find the answer themselves, because it is “already contained” in the question *they* formulated. For Bonhoeffer, this is precisely the problem. It is what Luther called the *cor curvum in se*, the spirit of human beings circulating around itself, “master of the world, but only of the world its ego interprets and thinks up”, it is “*self-restricted*”. They view “God as the one who satisfies

9 Over the years, De Gruchy (1984, 1999) has attempted to do theology in dialogue with Bonhoeffer’s legacy in relation to the specific and well-known situations that unfold in South Africa. He served as editor of *Bonhoeffer for a new day: Theology in a time of transition* (1997); *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1999), and the new edition of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vols. 3 and 8*. For important introductory publications on Bonhoeffer’s life and theology from a South African perspective, see De Gruchy (1988, 1989, 1994, 2004, 2012, 2013).

10 See Bethge (2000:97-124).

11 See Bethge (2000:125-146).

their religious needs”. It is themselves that they seek to posit “eternally in this world” (DBWE 10:404-405, my italics).

The anthropological question thus needs to be asked in relation to human beings’ boundaries, which Bonhoeffer, in this instance, calls God. “If the question about the human being is to be posed seriously, it can be so only where the human being is before God”, the boundary. In this instance, human beings are “torn completely out” of themselves, out of their inversion into themselves, and drawn before God – this is at the core of the who-question hermeneutic. It is here that Bonhoeffer finds the question about human beings to become astute “precisely because it no longer includes its own answer”. The foundation of being human is found not through themselves, “but through God”. In order to grasp what Bonhoeffer would later have in mind with his who-question, it is important to note that, in this instance, “God remains eternally beyond, eternally distant, even and precisely where God comes close to human beings”. If they are to get an answer to the question not only raised by themselves, but to the question they are, it is to be “directed to that which is absolutely exterior” to their existence. “God must in every case speak it ever anew”; it must come to them “from the outside” (DBWE 10:397-399).

It is in revelation that human beings are, in fact, torn out of their own reflections. They receive “the answer to his question only from and before God” in revelation. Thus, for him, the question about the human being “is derived from the question about God” and God’s revelation (DBWE 10:402-403). These questions also underlie Bonhoeffer’s habilitation thesis, *Act and being*, where he explores transcendental philosophy and ontology in theology. Human beings, he argues, “take all that exists into their transcendental I, which means that what exists cannot be genuinely objective”, it cannot confront “human existence”. This means for him that it cannot finally “interpret theologically the revelation of Christ” (DBWE 2:106). Marsh (1994:55) argued that, for Bonhoeffer, it is revelation “that demonstrates the insufficiency of all self-enclosed systems of thought”;¹² in fact, “it offers a compelling and unexpectedly rich alternative to ... conceptions of the self as the center of all relations to others” (Marsh 1994:vii).

12 Marsh not only recently published a biography on Bonhoeffer (2014), he also wrote on the promise of Bonhoeffer’s theology, asking as to Bonhoeffer’s work in the context of the German philosophical tradition. He also served as co-editor of the well-known *Theology and the practice of responsibility* (Floyd & Marsh 1994).

In “Concerning the Christian idea of God”, written while visiting Union Seminary in New York with his Sloane Fellowship,¹³ he similarly states that philosophical thinking “can never be a thinking in reality”. Although it can form a conception of reality, “conceived reality is not reality any longer”. Philosophical thinking, he reiterates, “is in itself a closed circle, with the ego as the centre”. The problem thus is that both other human beings and God are “subordinated to the ego”. Human beings refer everything to themselves, put themselves at the centre of the world, and make themselves *God*. For Bonhoeffer, it is important to realise that real reality is beyond the self. It is transcendent. He, therefore, expounds “the central and most difficult problem of a genuine theological epistemology” in a question that takes up what is central to his who-hermeneutic: “How can it be avoided that God should again be *pulled into* the circle of thought?” (DBWE 10:455, my italics).

In his *Christology* lectures (1933), compiled from student notes from lectures given in Berlin,¹⁴ the actual inherent gist behind the who-question gains clear contours. He defines the who-question over against questions that remain within the confines of self, unable to be radically claimed by the revelation of God in Christ for us. It is indeed for this reason that he begins his lectures on Christology in silence: “To speak of Christ is to be silent, and to be silent about Christ is to speak”. For Bonhoeffer, “*that* is obedient affirmation of God’s revelation”. The church “falls on its knees in silence before the inexpressible”; “The right way to proclaim Christ” is through silence (DBWE 12:300, my italics).

He then states that scholarly questions are normally reduced to questions that make the object fit into a classification the “I” already have at hand. What is the cause or what is the meaning of X? The problem in both cases, he argues, is that these questions ask how X is made to “fit into the classification that *I already* have at hand?” (DBWE 12:301, my italics).

The question of a Christology that wants to keep together both the act and the being of God, however, asks the *who*-question. It is this question, the who-are-you question, that is “asked by horrified, dethroned human reason”. The who-question is the question of faith, the question with which Christology is concerned. With this question, and this is the bottom line, “every possibility of classification must fall short” (DBWE 12:303).

The who-question, therefore, is the question about transcendence, the question able to express “the otherness of the other”. The question, and

13 See Bethge (2000:147-172).

14 See Bethge (2000:173-324).

this is the crux, “interrogates the very existence of the one asking it”. It is thus a question of the limits of human beings. By asking the question, human beings come up to the boundary of their own existence. For Bonhoeffer, in this light, “the question of one’s existence is the question of transcendence”. It is only in knowing one’s own limits or boundaries that it is possible to know where the “I” begins and where it ends; “transcendence is the boundary of the being”, and this boundary “has been *given* to me”. Therefore, the *question* that asks about my existence, the question that calls my existence into question, is the question “of *transcendence*”. It is in reference to the God who transcends and in this way calls into question that human beings not only “know who they are”, but who they are to be. If this then is the only question that “goes beyond my own being”, Bonhoeffer argues, then this is the only question asking about both act and being, about “transcendence and existence” (DBWE 12:303-305).

For Bonhoeffer, it is important to realise that the who-is-Jesus-Christ question cannot be answered by human beings themselves, because human beings cannot go beyond their own limits, “but remains entirely within its own frame of reference and mirrors itself to itself” (DBWE 12:303, *my italics*).

Bonhoeffer wants to prohibit any means whereby human beings can tell God who God is or who God is supposed to be, for them. “Tell me how you exist, tell me how you think, and I’ll tell you who you are”. In concrete terms, this means that human beings “cannot get around the figure of Jesus Christ” (DBWE 12:303-306), they can only be *confronted* with who He really is.

Already here he prohibits questions that allow for abstract thinking about God. The first prohibited question asks whether “the answer that is given is the right answer”. The “that” in “that God was revealed in Jesus Christ”, he argues, cannot be theologically questioned, because it will allow for the constructing of ideas about God. The second is how this “that” of the revelation” can be conceived. Again, the question cannot be allowed, for it will concede getting “behind Christ’s claim”. In contrast to our knowledge of God’s revelation, these questions lead to speculation, “presuming on the role” of God (DBWE 12:304).

With the who-question, Bonhoeffer thus prohibits questions that can allow any idea-constructing of a God “that resonates with us”, where Christ “becomes the object of human inquiry and is no longer *the living God who comes to us*” (Barker 2015:238). It is for this reason that “the Christological question is in its essence an ontological question”. Human beings, and this is at the core of Bonhoeffer’s question, “have to deal with

him". In this instance, Bonhoeffer reiterates, "the question, 'Who are you?' becomes most poignant" (DBWE 12:304-307).

What is important is that human beings are *constantly* confronted with the God who reveals Godself in Jesus Christ. The who-question has thus been turned around: "The question we have put to the person of Christ, 'Who are you?' comes back to us: 'who are you, that you ask this question?'" Thus, we are now questioned. It is only when this counter-question has been asked and we have been questioned in return, he argues, that "the Christological question has been definitively formulated" (DBWE 12:305). The who-question can, in fact, only be asked "by those who know *that it is being asked of them*" (DBWE 12:305-307).

This, of course, is most often resisted. When the who-question is continuously asked, and when we are indeed aware of the counter-question, in other words, "when some person is aware of having *confronted* this question", this Jesus Christ who is constantly passing through our time, is killed. "The person who was causing the worry has been killed, and along with that person, the question". Human beings, he writes, "kill the Jesus Christ who has appeared before it and challenged it". In fact, human beings go on living "with the unanswered question of existence and transcendence"; they go on as if they have answered it (DBWE 12:305-306). They thus merely remain within their own frame of references.

For Bonhoeffer, this is true of the church, which "attempts to be finished with Christ". Because it wants to be finished with Christ – to finalise Christ – the church "now and then kill[s] him" (DBWE 12:307).

In terms of "theological method", it is thus for Bonhoeffer important to continuously ask the who-question, to know who the who-question is asked to (DBWE 12:310).

"If it is I who says where God is to be found", he wrote in a letter to Rüdiger Schleicher during the finkenwalde period, "then I will always find a God there who in some manner corresponds to me, is pleasing to me, who is commensurate with my own nature". However, if it really is God who says where he is to be found, "then it will probably be a place that is not at all commensurate with my own nature and that does not please me at all" (DBWE 14:168).

3. ... JESUS CHRIST, ACTUALLY, FOR US

3.1 “Christ”?

For Bonhoeffer, there is only one way in which to know who God truly is, and that is by knowing Jesus Christ. It is only by revealing himself, that “I have opened to me” who he really is. It can happen “only in relation to that place where his person reveals himself to me as he really is”. It is there that Bonhoeffer finds “a new existence” to break *into* “our existence” (DBWE 12:308-310). I know about God either “out of my own” or “on the basis of his revelation of his own word”; in other words, “I let *him* determine the place” where *he* is to be known (DBWE 14:168, my italics). In one of many letters to the Finkenwalde Brothers, it becomes clear that, for Bonhoeffer, the answer as to the who-question is “*given* and must be given by God *himself*, in his own word in Jesus Christ”. In fact, “no one can answer this question” (DBWE 15:275, my italics). It is only God *himself*, to use Bonhoeffer language, that can answer it.

He reiterates that human attempts to “discover God” or to “unveil his secret reality” will inevitably fail. In fact, such attempts remain in “the sphere of the idea”. It is for this reason that revelation needs to take place “in *history* if at all” and, therefore, in Jesus Christ (DBWE 15:275, my italics).

First, Bonhoeffer wants to hold on to God’s *present* reality in Jesus Christ. He is the one who is “present now”. He is to be understood as present “in time and space”, that is “now and here”. In fact, it is possible to inquire as to who this Jesus Christ is, because he is “the Christ who is present” (DBWE 12:310).

This presence, however, can and has been misunderstood. On the one hand, this presence has been understood as “the influence that emanates from him”. Thus, in contrast to Christ himself being present, it is rather the influence he has had in history that is present or his influence that radiates into the present. The reason Bonhoeffer finds this to be a misunderstanding is that this influence is also an interpreted influence, separating the real Christ from whatever his influence has been interpreted to be. On the other hand, this presence is understood as whatever “image of Christ” the one reaching across history has brought into the present (DBWE 12:311). Again the misunderstanding is that this image is merely an interpreted image.

For Bonhoeffer, the question, therefore, has to be: “*who* is present, *who* is with us here and now?”. His own answer to the question is “the human-God Jesus”. What he means with this oft used concept is that God and Jesus, or whatever we conceive of as God and Jesus, is not to be divorced from one another. When we think who the human Christ is, he

argues, we simultaneously think of the God-Christ. For him, Jesus is not to be, in fact, *cannot* be in isolation from God and vice versa. "God in his timeless eternity is not God. Jesus in his humanity, limited in time, is not Jesus Christ". It is only in the human being Jesus Christ that God actually is God. It is, again, only in Jesus Christ that God is actually present. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the starting point for any Christology has to be "the God-human" (DBWE 12:313, my italics).

It is now clear why Bonhoeffer finds the mentioned interpretations of Christology to be *misinterpretations*. Although he is seen as present, Christ is not understood as person. It is in this sense that a theology of Christ "misses its point" (DBWE 12:311). To isolate the fact that he is God from the fact that he is human, to interpret the human as if he is not God, and vice versa, is again to formulate one's own idea of who this God is. "God", he reiterates, "entered history and no human attempt can grasp him beyond this history". It is not as if God cannot be elsewhere too, "but he cannot and should not be grasped and understood *except in Christ*" (DBWE 15:275, my italics). Secondly, Bonhoeffer thus holds on to the present Jesus Christ *as person*.

For him, therefore, God is revealed in "once-ness". The main difference between a "so-called revelation in the sphere of idea and a revelation in 'once-ness'" is that human beings "always will be able to learn a new idea and to fit it into (their) system of ideas". By contrast, revelation in "once-ness ... is a historical fact". The Christ who is present today "is the historical Christ". In fact, revelation in "once-ness" is viewed as always being a concrete historical challenge anew to human beings. This challenge cannot be overcome "by pulling it into the system which (they) already had before" (DBWE 12:328).

For Bonhoeffer, it is only in asking about person, and interpreting this person as the God-human, that the *who-question* is *actually* asked. The *who-question* is directed to his person, the God-human Jesus Christ (DBWE 12:328). He would, therefore, describe the "subject matter" of Christology as "the personal ontological structure of the whole, historical Christ". By this, Bonhoeffer has in mind Christ in his whole being: "It is the whole Christ whom we ask and who answers" (DBWE 12:310).

What is central to the *who-question* for Bonhoeffer is thus that the question can only be asked *after* he is *already* revealed. The question can be asked "only after the self-revelation of the other to whom one puts the question has already taken place". To put it differently, "the question of who can only be asked on condition that the answer has already been given", thus disallowing any idea of who God is (DBWE 12:303).

In the student notes of his lectures on “The history of twentieth century Systematic Theology”, Bonhoeffer highlights that fact that this self-revelation, Jesus Christ, is “really God’s as such, wholly free”. For him, God is wholly free as present *person*, in the fact that, at the same time, he is “shrouded in the garment of history”. It is not as if the revelation only to a certain extent answers the who-question, as if the meaning of the revelation is “postulated after the fact”. It is “from the revelation itself” that we “do know God as the absolute beginning of self-revelation in Jesus Christ”. To accept the self-revelation of God, Bonhoeffer argues, is not only to accept “the beginning of all genuine theological thinking”. It is also to allow “space for the freedom of the *living* God” (DBWE 11:230).

This then leads Bonhoeffer to interpret who Christ is today with Luther’s “pro-me” structure.¹⁵ The person of Jesus Christ is thus to be understood in his “relatedness to me”. “His being-Christ is his being-for-me”. Jesus Christ *is* pro-me. In other words, it is impossible to think of Jesus Christ in himself, “in his being-in-himself”. In fact, if a theology concerned with Jesus Christ were to start from any other point than the fact “that God and Christ can only be Christ pro-me”, theology will begin with their own ideas of who *they* think God is (DBWE 12:314).

In short, Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the pro-me structure takes seriously the givenness of Jesus Christ, the fact that we can know him only in what he himself wants to let us know about him, only in the way of his self-revelation. What is decisive about this pro-me structure is that Jesus Christ’s “being-there-for-you comes together with being-*there*-for-you” (DBWE 12:315). The pro-me structure, therefore, gains particular contours in Bonhoeffer’s understanding of who Christ is *actually* (DBWE 12:316).

3.2 “... actually”?

It is in the Word¹⁶ that Bonhoeffer finds Jesus Christ to be *actual*.

What is important, in this instance, is that, for him, God has “the freedom to walk in ways unknown to us”, in fact, even “the freedom to choose other ways of self-revelation”. God, however, can speak to human beings only through the Word. It is to the Word that God is bound. It is

15 For an in-depth study of Bonhoeffer’s reception of Luther’s theology, see DeJonge (2012, 2017), who is the co-editor (with Clifford Green) of *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (2013) and the journal, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Yearbook*.

16 In Bonhoeffer’s mind, it is not only Christ who is “wholly Word”. The sacrament “is wholly Word”, too. Following Luther, it is as Word and sacrament that “Christ is present as church-community” (DBW 12:323). The Word, the sacrament, and the church-community thus confirm the actuality of Jesus Christ pro-me.

because he is there “for the sake of humankind” that it is to this Word that God bound *Godself* (DBWE 12:316).

Bonhoeffer distinguishes the Word of God, “the living Word to humankind”, from the human word, which is “word in the form of an idea”. With the word as idea he means that it is directly accessible “by any person at any time”. It is possible to take possession of the word as idea. This word, therefore, cannot be applied to Jesus Christ, because “the ‘idea of God’ that is embodied in Christ” is not accessible by any person at any time (DBWE 12:316).

In contrast to this word as an idea that “remains essentially within itself” is the Word actually “spoken to us”, the living Word “in the form of address”. It takes place in time and space; “it is a one-time event” in history; it “happens there where it is spoken to someone by another”. Again, Bonhoeffer thus highlights the freedom of God as the one who speaks, as the one who decides what is said, and when. This Word is “a new event every time”, and is to be contrasted by Jesus Christ as idea-word, as “timeless truth” not able to actually speak to us anew. As living Word, Jesus Christ is “breaking into a concrete moment, as God’s speaking to us”.¹⁷ It is thus God who in Jesus Christ allows himself to be heard, not human beings; “it is entirely within his freedom to reveal himself to me or to hide himself from me” (DBWE 12:316).

In this light, it is clear why, for Bonhoeffer, the living Word who is Jesus Christ is characterised by the pro-me structure, as the Word of the living God to humankind. In his interpretation of the Word, Bonhoeffer thus keeps together both the “contingent character of his revelation” and his “commitment to humankind”. For Bonhoeffer, this is the prerequisite determining what the *content* will actually be (DBWE 12:316).

This pro-me prerequisite gains particular content in the resurrected *Crucified!*

In the already mentioned letter to Bethge, it is a theology of the cross that undergirds his question. He refers to God as the one “who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God”, the one who “consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross”, the one who is “weak and powerless in the world”. For Bonhoeffer it is precisely the “powerless and the suffering God” that the Biblical traditions refer us to (DBWE 8:479).

17 See Wüstenberg & Zimmermann’s (2013) collection of essays on Bonhoeffer’s biblical hermeneutics. See also Zimmerman’s (2013) essay on Bonhoeffer’s Christological hermeneutics.

It is this theology of the cross that has been one of Bonhoeffer’s main concerns throughout his theology and life.¹⁸ In the lecture, “Jesus Christ and the essence of Christianity”, his mentioned question has already been formulated, albeit in a different form: “What does *the cross* have to say to us, today” (DBWE 10:358).

In contrast to “a God who is merely a thought or an ideal”, in a sermon at the establishment of the preachers’ seminary at Zingst,¹⁹ he described the goal of life as “beholding God’s face”, which is disclosed “in Jesus Christ, *the Crucified*” (DBWE 14:847).

For him, the cross becomes “the centre and the paradoxical emblem” of Christianity (DBWE 10:357), because the form that “God takes in the world is very different” from the image human beings constantly construe of God (Barker 2015:317). It is not the God “of our own making”. He does not appear in the form that “we might expect” (Barker 2015:394). In fact, he comes to us in “forms that remain hidden or strange to the world at large” (Barker 2015:405). It is not possible for human beings to find God, as “we do not find God where we think God should be located” (Barker 2015:401). Thus, God is to be found “where we fail to look” (Barker 2015:421). “God”, Bonhoeffer reiterates, “is indeed something entirely different from humankind” (DBWE 11:230). Whatever we imagine God to be, “the God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with all that” (DBWE 8:515). Indeed, God is “not congenial to our deepest essence” (DBWE 10:465). The human way is, in fact, “crossed by God’s way” (DBWE 13:400).

It is in this sense that God becomes a “stumbling block” (DBWE 12:359). In the mentioned letter to Schleicher, it is clear that where we find God is not only not clear *a priori*, but that it is a place that we do *not* “find pleasant”. It is a place “alien to us in every way, a place utterly *repugnant* to us” (DBWE 14:168, my italics). In fact, the place where human beings “must take offense” is the very place where God is met (DBWE 14:544).

18 Barker, who did an in-depth study of Luther’s *Theologia Crucis* in Bonhoeffer’s Christology, takes Bonhoeffer’s theology of the cross to be the lens through which to view all of his theology. “When it is used as a hermeneutical tool to evaluate the foundations and developments within Bonhoeffer’s theology”, he argues, “it will bring into focus the major theological orientation, perspective, and themes in Bonhoeffer’s Christology, the organizing center of his theology” (Barker 2015:17). In summary, he argues, that “Christ and his cross cannot be separated in Bonhoeffer’s mind”. Indeed, “when Bonhoeffer talked about Christ, he referred to the cross and its significance” (Barker 2015:164).

19 See Bethge (2000:419-492).

3.3 “... for us”?

That Bonhoeffer finds God to be a stumbling block lies in the fact that God is found “in the midst of lowliness”; he “goes right into the middle of it” (DBWE 13:343). Jesus Christ, he reiterates, “is not distant from the world”, he is not in “an otherworldly dimension”. It is on the cross, rather, that he “went into the deepest depths of the world” (DBWE 11:379).

In fact, in the world, God is “poor and lowly, small and weak (DBWE 13:362). In contrast to the God we would have wanted revealed (DBWE 10:465), this God is “on the cross, (is) rejected and abandoned by God and human beings” (DBWE 4:284). His godliness consists in “debasement” (DBWE 14:351). He is revealed in “the poor life of a suffering man” (DBWE 10:465). “God”, he reiterated in a sermon in London,²⁰ “is a suffering God” (DBWE 13:403).

It is in this manner that God not only relates in differentiated ways “to forlorn, alienated people of this earth” (Barker 2015:167), “with the suffering of the world” (Barker 2015:211). He, in fact, *is for us*. Bonhoeffer answers the question of who God is by reiterating that he, to use Bonhoeffer language again, is “God in human form”, God who is “there for others”. He is the Crucified, and this means “the human being *for others*” (DBWE 8:501).

In the mentioned letter to Bethge, it is clear that God is for us by helping us. He highlights that “only the suffering God *can help*” (DBWE 8:480).

But how does he then actually help us?

For Bonhoeffer, God helps by being “at our side” (DBWE 8:480). This is also clear in his earlier theology. God is at the side of “the unnoticed, the unremarkable, the excluded, the powerless, and the broken” (DBWE 13:343-345).

In *Ethics*, God is where “refuge” is sought. God, argues Bonhoeffer, helps by being “the shelter to whom one flees for protection” (DBWE 6:345).

He also helps by his “judgment” (DBWE 10:461). This is particularly important for an understanding of Bonhoeffer’s question. What he means by this judgement becomes particularly clear where he clarifies the meaning of the mentioned age. By judgement he, *inter alia*, means that God is being recognised in a way that does not cover up the godlessness of the world. We are not to “cover up or transfigure its godlessness somehow with religion” (DBWE 8:480). In *Life together*, this godlessness links with the “exclusion of Christ”. For to exclude “the weak and insignificant, the

20 See Bethge (2000:325-418).

seemingly useless people” is to exclude Jesus Christ (DBWE 5:34). It is thus also in this manner that godlessness has to be “uncovered” (DBWE 8:482).

To be judged by God also means to recognise our “sinfulness”. To be judged means to consequently recognise “the judgment of God” upon us (DBWE 10:461). Precisely here he helps, for “to be judged by God *is grace for life*”. God “thwarts” whatever human beings do and in this way “tugs our gaze upward to God’s grace” (DBWE 15:275). It is from this grace that Christians are able *to live*. “Christ’s gift” is not religion, “but God’s grace” culminating “in the cross” (DBWE 10:358).

It is through the cross, Bonhoeffer argues, that God *gives us back to the world*, “its work and toil”, that is, to the world and “the human beings who live, act, struggle, and suffer on it” (DBWE 15:275). What he means by this is spelled out in detail.

To be Christian “is not an end in itself”. It is to live as human beings “before God”. But God is revealed in becoming a human being. This means that God is revealed “as the one who seeks to be there not for God’s own sake but ‘for us’”. Therefore, to live as human beings before the God who himself became a human being means “to be there not for oneself, but for God and for other human beings” (DBWE 6:345). In a letter to Bethge, he describes the relationship between God and human beings as that of a new life in Jesus Christ, by which he means a new life in “being there for others” (DBWE 8:501).

The church’s relation to God is, therefore, not in “infinite, unattainable tasks”, but in being human “*for others*” (DBWE 8:501).

In light of a deeper and more differentiated understanding of the theology underlying and leading up to Bonhoeffer’s more developed question, it is possible to ask about the contribution of the question to a hermeneutic for being church in what he called a religionless age, today.

4. BONHOEFFER’S QUESTION FOR THE CHURCH

How can the question then serve as a hermeneutical tool for the church in a religionless age? Stated differently, how does this question serve as a hermeneutical tool able to move away from a metaphysical, subjective, *God of the gaps* that characterises this religionless age?

This question gains clearer contours in light of the already mentioned outline for a book, where Bonhoeffer famously adds a *mark* to the church. He underlines this in the most concrete manner: “The church is church only when *it is there for others*”. The church, as human beings living a new

life in Jesus Christ, he reiterates, “must tell people in every calling what a life with Christ is”; in other words, “what it means ‘to be there for others’” (DBWE 8:503, my italics).²¹ But what does this mean?

It might be insightful to examine what Bonhoeffer himself published with *the church* in mind (e.g., *Life together*, *Discipleship*, *Ethics*, and *Letters and papers from prison*), asking how the hermeneutic inherent in his question was *knowingly or unknowingly* present in these publications, in a way articulating the hermeneutical questions raised through this tool.

First, the church asking Bonhoeffer’s question will constantly allow herself to be “interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again”. He makes this point in *Life together*, where he particularly reflects on the time of training pastors for the church. When the church is constrained from these confrontations, she passes by “the visible sign of the cross” that interrupts our lives. The cross shows the church God’s way, which is to be differentiated from our own (DBWE 5:99). Bonhoeffer’s who-question thus continuously reminds us that the church does not belong “in the seclusion of a cloistered life” (DBWE 5:27).

Secondly, for a hermeneutic concerned with being church, it means that the church participates in the resurrected Crucified. The centre of Bonhoeffer’s book for the church on *Discipleship* makes this point. The church is to “bear the image” of Jesus Christ (DBW 4:281), who is Christ only “as one who suffers and is rejected” (DBW 4:84). It is with this image of Jesus Christ that “all other images fade away”. In fact, the image of the Crucified “enters, permeates, and transforms” the images the church herself construes (DBW 4:281). The church who takes Bonhoeffer’s question seriously is, therefore, being conformed to the image of God on the cross. In fact, this is the “goal” of the church (DBW 4:248): The church is to “take on the same cruciform shape” (DBW 4:285). What this means for the church is a new church law. The law of the church now becomes the

21 See, in this regard, Bongmba (1997:192), who “offers general proposals for the priority of an Other in contextual ethics in an African setting”. See also Smit (1995:3), who elucidates how Bonhoeffer’s “interest in ‘the other’ and in the importance of the other in our own lives as human beings and as Christians ... goes far back in his own thought and writings and can be found almost everywhere”. See also Floyd’s research on theology and the dialectics of otherness, where he “attempts to contribute to contemporary philosophical-theological dialogue by means of a meditation ‘in’, rather than merely ‘upon’ the method and style of Bonhoeffer”. For this attempt, he utilizes Bonhoeffer’s so-called “dialectics of otherness” (1988:xi). For the way in which his concern with this dialectic influenced his interpretation of Bonhoeffer’s theology, see also Floyd (2005, 2009).

cross of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, this law of the Crucified is not an invisible, but a visible form of compassion for one another (DBW 14:475).

Thirdly, this is possible, because in Christ the church is given the means whereby to take part in the reality of God and the reality of the world, “but not the one without the other”. In terms of being church, this means that the church is set in the reality of the world and that, in this manner, the reality of God “discloses itself”. What is important for Bonhoeffer is that this reality of the world is always already taken up in the reality of God. In what was to be his *magnum opus*, published after his death as *Ethics*, it is clear that Bonhoeffer is not pleading for another principle merely to be applied today. The question of who Jesus Christ is for us today is rather asked in light of his unfinished thoughts on the reality of Jesus Christ, which he understands to be irrevocably connected to the reality of the world *in* Christ. What matters today is that the church participates in the reality of God and the world *in* Jesus Christ (DBWE 6:55). In contrast to a religious society merely fighting for its own interest, “for a piece of territory”, and in this way ceasing to be the church of God in the world (DBWE 6:63), the church’s relation to the world, in light of the continuous asking of Bonhoeffer question, will thus be determined completely by God’s relation to the world (DBWE 6:60). In short, the church can no longer “speak of the world as if it were lost, as if it were separated from God” (DBWE 6:66). Bonhoeffer’s question thus “calls us to single-minded action and life” in the world (DBWE 6:400).

In short, for a hermeneutic concerned with being church in light of the theology inherent in Bonhoeffer’s question, it means, fourthly, that “justice is done to life” by affirming it in all its dimensions. These are the last words of an incomplete sketch, “The view from below”, not included in his final reflection called “After ten years”, published as the prologue for *Letters and papers from prison*. In this instance, Bonhoeffer asks that we learn to see with new eyes from the perspective of the suffering, the perspective “of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled” (DBWE 8:52). In light of the continual asking of Bonhoeffer’s question, the church will thus constantly seek out the resurrected Crucified in the world (DBWE 8:485). This is also his point in his thoughts on the day of baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge. He reiterates that the church is the church by identifying not only generously, but also selflessly with the whole of humanity, particularly with the suffering of human beings. It is only in this manner that the church is the true church (DBWE 8:389).

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