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Original publication:

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The Understanding of Mystery in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

in: Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ulrik Nissen and Christiane Tietz (eds.), *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium*, pp. 9–26

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2007 (Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie 119)

URL: <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666563478.9>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Andreas Pangritz: **The Understanding of Mystery in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

„Das ‚Geheimnis‘ steht im Verhältnis zum ‚Wort‘ wie die Pause zur Musik, die aus ihr geboren wird, mindestens: atmet“ (F.-W. Marquardt, 1987).

It is generally accepted that the notion of „mystery” plays a crucial rôle in Bonhoeffer’s theology. „God revealed in the flesh,‘ the God-man Jesus Christ, is the holy mystery which theology is appointed to guard. What a mistake to think that it is the task of theology to unravel God’s mystery, to bring it down to the flat, ordinary human wisdom of experience and reason! It is the task of theology solely to preserve God’s wonder as wonder, to understand, to defend, to glorify God’s mystery as mystery.“¹ With these words Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes in a „Circular Letter“ at Christmas 1939 to the brethren of the seminary and the pastors of the Confessing Church what should be the task of Christian theology in general and of christology in particular: to praise the glory of God in the wonder of his incarnation.

In what follows I will first treat the notion of „mystery“ in Bonhoeffer’s theological thinking in general. In a second section I will concentrate upon the specific way recommended by Bonhoeffer to deal with the mystery, i.e. the „arcane discipline“. In a final chapter I will present some comparative reflexions referring to the relationship between „mystery“ and „commandment“ proposed by the German-Jewish thinker Leo Baeck.

1. The notion of „mystery” in Bonhoeffer’s Theology

It has become customary to regard christology as the center of Bonhoeffer’s thought. And indeed, the question „Who is Jesus Christ?“ forms the *cantus firmus* of Bonhoeffer’s theological development from the beginning to the end.² This question, originally being latent in the interest for the sociology of the church, becomes explicit in Bonhoeffer’s academic *Christology* lectures of 1933, the year when the Nazis came to power in Germany. And still in 1944, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the programmatic question, „who Christ really is, for us today“, forms the starting point of Bonhoeffer’s revolutionary theological reflections. However, the christological *cantus firmus* is continuously accompanied by „wordly“ counterpoints, as Bonhoeffer

¹ *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Geoffrey Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, San Francisco, 472.

² Cf. Andreas Pangritz, „Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?“, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. by John W. de Gruchy, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne 1999, 134-153.

phrases it in a draft for his *Ethics*: „The greater the exclusiveness, the greater the freedom ... The more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ as our Lord, the more fully the wide range of His dominion will be disclosed to us.“³

The *Christology* lectures have been handed down to us by notes from Bonhoeffer's students.⁴ According to Eberhard Bethge these lectures form „the high point of Bonhoeffer's academic career“. At the same time, they can be read as a commentary on the socio-political context in Germany: Hitler had been Chancellor for three months, when Bonhoeffer began his *Christology* lectures in summer 1933. As an academic teacher he attempted to speak strictly theologically, yet indirect reflections on the political context can be discovered in the text.

Bonhoeffer starts his lectures by emphasizing the „doxological“ structure of the dogma: „Teaching about Christ begins in silence ... That has nothing to do with the silence of the mystics, who in their dumbness chatter away secretly in their soul by themselves. The silence of the Church is the silence before the Word. In so far as the Church proclaims the Word, it essentially falls down silently before the inexpressible ...“ The „study of this proclamation“ is possible only on condition of „the humble silence of the worshipping congregation ... To pray is to be silent and at the same time to cry out, before God and in the presence of his Word.“⁵

It has often been observed that Bonhoeffer strongly supported the doctrine of the „two natures“, divine and human, of Jesus Christ, which had found its „classical formulation“ in the Chalcedonian Definition (451), according to which the person of Christ is perceived „in two natures, without confusion and without change ..., without separation and without division“. Why is this formulation important in the year 1933? Obviously Bonhoeffer's support of the traditional christological dogma can be interpreted as an attempt at defending the doctrine of the church against the German Christian heresy which was en vogue at that time. On the other hand, Bonhoeffer in a kind of intensification of the traditional identification of Christ with the „logos“ describes Christ as „the Counter-Logos“.⁶ Therefore, the creed of the fathers of the early church, according to which Christ is confessed as true God and true human being at the same time, should be interpreted in a critical way. In Bonhoeffer's words:

³ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, translated by N. H. Smith, London (1955) ⁵1985, 58.

⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre*, trans. E. H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 27 (transl. altered).

⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 30.

„What remains are simple negations. No positive form of thought remains to say what happens in the God-Man Jesus Christ. The mystery is left as a mystery and must be understood as such. The approach is reserved for faith only ... Since the Chalcedonian Definition, the theologian who is concerned with christology must keep within the boundaries drawn by the conceptual tension of this negative formula and preserve it ... It speaks about ‚natures‘, but expresses the facts in such a way as to show that the concept of ‚natures‘ is quite inappropriate for this use. It works with concepts which it declares to be heretical formulas unless they are used in contradiction and paradox.“ According to Bonhoeffer it is just „in its negative formulations“ that the Chalcedonian Definition is „the ideal conciliar theological statement“.⁷ It entails a „prohibition against using objectifying categories for the solution of the question of the God-Man relationship“ in Jesus Christ. „By its insistence on the negative in contradictory opposites“ the Chalcedonian Definition has, indeed, „superseded the doctrine of the two natures ... This critical significance of the Chalcedonian Definition is to be taken further.“⁸ In its negativity this definition provides a free space for the mystery of Christ.

Christology remains central in Bonhoeffer's further theological development. However, important shifts of accent can be observed within his dealing with the christological question. In the draft „Inheritance and Decay“, which should form a part of his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer notes in 1940 that „western history is, by God's will, indissolubly linked with the people of Israel“. And in 1941, when the mass deportations of the Jews began, he emphasizes the christological consequences of this insight, inserting into his manuscript a prophetic clause, according to which western history is linked with Israel „not only genetically but also in a genuine uninterrupted encounter. The Jew keeps open the question of Christ ... An expulsion of the Jews from the west must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew.“⁹

In his prison correspondence with Eberhard Bethge Bonhoeffer discovers the significance of the mystery of God's name according to Jewish tradition and applies it to Christology: Already in the first smuggled letter to E. Bethge (November 18-21, 1943) Bonhoeffer notes that he now understands better than before „the fact that the

⁷ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 87f. (transl. altered).

⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 97f.

⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 89f.

Israelites *never* uttered the name of God“.¹⁰ One consequence of this observation is an important reservation with respect to all too direct christological thinking. In his letter of Advent 2 (5 December), 1943, Bonhoeffer is convinced that „it is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ“. In Bonhoeffer’s opinion „it is not Christian to want to take our thoughts and feelings too quickly and too directly from the New Testament... One cannot and must not speak the ultimate word before the penultimate.“¹¹ Again, at the end of the letter of April 30, 1944, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the New Testament has to be read „in the light of the Old“.¹²

Interesting enough, Bonhoeffer’s new awareness of the „wordly“ perspective of the Hebrew Bible leads him to a deeper understanding of the Chalcedonian Definition as well. Impressed by the erotic power of the Song of Songs he attempts to liberate the doctrine of the „two natures“ in Christ from its dogmatic petrification by employing the musical imagery of polyphony: „Even in the Bibel we have the Song of Songs; and really one can imagine no more ardent, passionate, sensual love than is portrayed there ... It’s a good thing that the book is in the Bible, in face of all those who believe that the restraint of passion is Christian (where is such a restraint in the Old Testament?) Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are ‚undivided and yet distinct‘, in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of polyphony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*?“¹³

2. Aspects of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s „Arcane Discipline“

We turn now to Bonhoeffer’s specific interest in „arcane discipline“ as the way how to deal appropriately with the mystery.¹⁴

2.1. The „arcane“, „qualified silence“ and the quest for a concrete commandment (1932/33)

¹⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison. The Enlarged Edition*, ed. by E. Bethge, New York 1972, 135.

¹¹ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 157 (transl. altered).

¹² D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 282.

¹³ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 303.

¹⁴ Cf. Andreas Pangritz, Aspekte der „Arkandisziplin“ bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in: Theologische Literaturzeitung 119, 1994, 755-768.

Already in the published version of his doctoral dissertation on „The Communion of Saints” (1930), in the chapter dealing with „authority and freedom in the empirical church” inspired by Karl Barth’s „Christian Dogmatics in Draft” (1927) Bonhoeffer recommends „qualified silence” instead of unqualified talk in order to prepare a qualified word of the church.¹⁵ And again in the ecumenical address „On the Theological Basis of the Work of the World Alliance” (for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, July 26, 1932) Bonhoeffer reflects about the possibility of „qualified silence”, this time within an ethical context: When the church does not have at her disposal a „concrete commandment” with respect to the problem of war and peace („pacifism”!) or with respect to the urgent social problems („socialism”!), „qualified silence may be more appropriate than unqualified talk” in hypocritical principles.¹⁶

Even more interesting is a place in Bonhoeffer’s lecture on „Recent Publications in Systematic Theology” at Berlin university (winter term 1932/33), where he explicitly deals with the political events of the time. With Barth and against Gogarten Bonhoeffer insists on „the relative right of revolution” according to the „better justice” of the gospel,¹⁷ whereas Brunner’s Ethics seems him to lack of political concreteness.¹⁸ On February 21, 1933, in the days after the defeat of the Weimar republic, Bonhoeffer concludes his lecture with a comment on Hans Asmussen’s *Altona Confession* („Wort und Bekenntnis Altonaer Pastoren in der Not und Verwirrung des öffentlichen Lebens”, december 19, 1932) on occasion of a bloody Nazi riot in the communist dominated worker’s district of Altona. In their „Confession” the Altona ministers, roused by the sight of shot workers in front of the church, had rejected the usual abuse of the church for military, state and party political purposes. Bonhoeffer appreciates this clarification. On the other hand he criticizes that „the conflict of the individual with the state is still looked upon too individualistically”. He pleads for a distinction between confession, doctrine, and proclamation of the church: Whereas teaching and preaching should be directed towards the public, the

¹⁵ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, DBW 1, München 1986, 172.

¹⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, Zur theologischen Begründung der Weltbundarbeit [On the Theological Basis of the Work of the World Alliance], in: *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931-1932*, ed. by E. Amelung and C. Strohm, Gütersloh 1994 (DBW 11), 330; cf. *ibid.* 332.

¹⁷ D. Bonhoeffer, Besprechung und Diskussion systematisch-theologischer Neuerscheinungen, in: *Berlin 1932-1933* (DBW 12), 167.

¹⁸ D. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, DBW 12, 176.

confession of the church should be restricted to an event within the congregation. And in this context he recommends again „qualified silence”.¹⁹

Trying to understand more precisely the content of this hardly disguised criticism of the public „Altona Confession” we have to consult Bonhoeffer’s lecture on „The Nature of the Church” (summer term 1932), where he deals with the function of the confession of faith within the congregation. In this context we can read: „The confession of faith must be a wholly sincere response to God’s Word of truth ... Confession of faith is a matter of our true, present stance before God.”²⁰ And a few days later Bonhoeffer continues: „Confession of faith is not to be confused with professing a religion. Such profession uses the confession as propaganda and ammunition against the Godless. The confession of faith belongs rather to the Christian gathering of those who believe. Nowhere else is it tenable ... The primary confession of the Christian community before the world is the deed. (The confession belongs as arcanum to the worshipping service) ... The confession is not the same as loudly shrieking out propaganda, it must be preserved as the most sacred possession of the community. The deed alone is our confession before the world.”²¹

From this unusual view of what should be the function of confession we can learn that Bonhoeffer already on the eve of the Nazi’s access to power and two years before the Confessing Church was constituted in Barmen (1934) supported a position that was sceptical with respect to the possibility of a public confession of faith, as it was intended by the compromise found between Karl Barth and Hans Asmussen in Barmen. According to Barth, the „Barmen Declaration” primarily was addressed to the church – „What we in Barmen wished to do was *gathering* of the dispersed (Lutheran, reformed, united, positive, liberal, pietist) Christian spirits”²² – and in so far it would belong – in Bonhoeffer’s words – to the „arcane” of the „Christian gathering of those who believe”. According to Asmussen, on the other hand, the „Barmen Declaration” was addressed not at least to the public. Therefore he had to qualify the condemnation of the heresy with the political reservation: „...We are not protesting as

¹⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., in: DBW 12, 177f.

²⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, Das Wesen der Kirche, in: DBW 11, 283 (June 25, 1932).

²¹ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., in: DBW 11, 285 (June 29, 1932); cf. D. Bonhoeffer, The Nature of the Church, in: *A Testament to Freedom*, 91 [transl. altered].

²² Cf. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten*, München 1975, 260.

members of the people against the recent history of the people, not as citizens against the new state, not as subjects against the authorities.”²³

Submitting the confession of faith to the „arcane” Bonhoeffer occupied a theological position, which would lead him into continuous tension with the Confessing Church. The „arcane” confession of faith would lead him into a constantly deepening understanding of the passion of Christ as the „powerlessness of God in the World”, whereas the quest for a „concrete commandment” would find its answer in his participation in the political conspiracy against Hitler as a „deed which interprets itself” as „the primary confession of the Christian before the world” in solidarity with the perpetrated.

2.2. The „arcane discipline” and the question of the boundaries of the church (1936/37)

It seems that in the Finkenwalde period Bonhoeffer for the first time explicitly used the term „arcane discipline”. The students in Finkenwalde „were surprised when Bonhoeffer sought to revive this piece of early church history” of which they „had never taken any notice”.²⁴ In at least three different Finkenwalde lectures Bonhoeffer used the term „arcane discipline” in order to recall a certain practice of the early church in her relation to the outsiders: in the lecture on „Catechetics” (winter term 1936/37), in the historical introduction to the lecture on „Homiletics” (summer 1937), and in the lecture on „New Testament” (1937) preparing the book on *Discipleship*.

The relevant paragraph in the Finkenwalde „Catechetics” is most detailed: Dealing with the structure of the „catechumenate” in the early church Bonhoeffer describes the „three-stage structure” of baptismal instruction. The third stage, when the symbol of faith, the creed is expounded, is, according to Bonhoeffer, submitted to the „disciplina arcanorum”. Bonhoeffer explains the function of this „arcane discipline” in the early church as follows: „During the period of persecution it held the congregation together and protected its services from the pagans. The situation of persecution by the state has caused this security measure.”²⁵ It is immediately clear that this

²³ Cf. Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung, ed. by W. Burgsmüller and R. Weth, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984, 48.

²⁴ E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography*, Revised edition, revised and edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Minneapolis 1999, 881.

²⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, Katechetik, in: *Illegale Theologenausbildung: Finkenwalde 1935-37*, ed. by O. Dudzus and Jürgen Henkys etc., Gütersloh 1996 (DBW 14), 549f., note 86; cf. *ibid.* 553; cf. also: *ibid.*, 526 (Homiletik).

explanation intends to arouse associations with the situation of the Confessing Church in the Nazi state.

The common ground of the Finkenwalde allusions to the „arcane discipline” is the defensive attitude: Bonhoeffer characterizes the „arcane discipline” as a „protection measure” intended to underline the boundaries of the church.²⁶ In the book on *Discipleship* we can find another allusion with the same intention, when Bonhoeffer talks about the „costly grace” without, however, using the term „arcane discipline”. But the allusion is quite clear when he asks: „Where were those truths which impelled the early Church to institute the catechumenate, which enabled a strict watch to be kept over the frontier between the Church and the world, and afforded adequate protection for costly grace?”²⁷

However, the „arcane discipline” of the Finkenwalde period was a transition stage rather than Bonhoeffer’s definitive position, protecting a „breathing space” for the „visible church” within a wicked world. After he had become involved into military conspiracy, Bonhoeffer questioned this conception of ethical „thinking in terms of two spheres”, „the one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, and the other worldly, profane, natural and un-Christian”.²⁸ And looking back from the „Outline for a book” conceived during his imprisonment in Tegel in August 1944, we may ask if Bonhoeffer’s own understanding of the „arcane discipline” during the Finkenwalde period is not part of what he later criticized as „the church on the defensive. No taking risks for others”.²⁹

2.3. *The „arcane discipline” and the „theology of powerlessness” in a „world come of age”* (1944)

We have now to consider Bonhoeffer’s references to the „arcane discipline” in his prison correspondence with Eberhard Bethge. The main theological question of Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* is a new formulation of the Christological problem. As Bonhoeffer writes programmatically in his famous letter to E. Bethge on April 30, 1944: „What is bothering me incessantly is the question what

²⁶ The most provocative expression of this attitude had been his essay on „The Question of the Boundaries of the Church and Church Union” (April/June 1936) with the phrase: „Whoever knowingly cuts himself off from the Confessing Church in Germany cuts himself off from salvation” (cf. *A Testament to Freedom*, 173).

²⁷ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R. H. Fuller, London (1959), 141986, 45.

²⁸ Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 168 („Christ, Reality and Good”, summer 1940).

²⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 381.

Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today“.³⁰ As already in his *Christology* lectures of 1933, Bonhoeffer obviously „does not consider from a distance how much of tradition can be retained, but ... inquires into the person of Christ and into the way in which he encounters and defines us today“. To put it more precisely, Bonhoeffer „inquired into the way in which Christ is Lord“ in a world come of age.³¹ Or, in Bonhoeffer’s own words (June 30, 1944): „Let me just summarize briefly what I am concerned about – the claim of a world that has come of age by Jesus Christ.“³²

It is striking that the first reference to the »arcane discipline« occurs right in the first »theological letter« on April 30, 1944, where Bonhoeffer raises the question „who Christ really is, for us today“.³³ After asking how Christ can become „the Lord of the religionless as well“ Bonhoeffer goes on praising Karl Barth, „who is the only one to have started along this line of thought“, but „did not carry it to completion“.³⁴ But at this point another series of question follows: „What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world? How do we speak of God – without religion ...?“³⁵ Bonhoeffer does not yet propose any answer, but rather he concludes as a kind of postscript with a new series of questions: „What is the place of worship and prayer in a religionless situation? Does the arcane discipline, or alternatively the difference (which I have suggested to you before) between penultimate and ultimate, take on a new importance here?“³⁶

Immediately in the following letter to Bethge on May 5, 1944, Bonhoeffer takes up the theme again, announcing „a few more words about ‚religionlessness‘“. Again Bonhoeffer admits that „Barth was the first theologian to begin the criticism of religion“, which „remains his really great merit“.³⁷ However, in contrast to Barth’s approach,³⁸ which – according to Bonhoeffer – „makes it too easy for itself, by setting up ... in the last analysis a law of faith“, where each dogma of the church, whether it

³⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 279.

³¹ E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 864.

³² D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 342.

³³ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 279.

³⁴ Here we hear for the first time the infamous remark on Barth’s alleged „positivism of revelation“.

³⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 280. – Cf. *ibid.*, 280f.: „In what way are we ... the ‚ek-klesia‘, those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?“

³⁶ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 281 (transl. altered). – Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 98ff.: „The Last Things and the Things before the Last“.

³⁷ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 286.

³⁸ Here Bonhoeffer again criticizes Barth’s „positivist doctrine of revelation«, which „isn’t biblical“.

be „virgin birth, Trinity, or anything else” is „an equally significant and necessary part of the whole, which must simply be swallowed as whole or not at all”, Bonhoeffer affirms: „There are degrees of knowledge and degrees of significance; that means that an arcane discipline must be restored whereby the *mysteries* of the Christian faith are protected against profanation.”³⁹

It seems that the function of the „arcane discipline” has changed in these notes compared with the Finkenwalde period: Still there is something to be protected. But it is no longer the boundaries of the church which should be defended against the attack by a wicked world, now „the *mysteries* of the Christian faith” are in danger. And these mysteries are threatened not by the world outside, but by „profanation” through the church itself. The danger comes from within. Therefore Bonhoeffer contrasts his quest for a restored „arcane discipline” with Barth’s alleged „positivism of revelation”, which would convert faith into a „law”. Independently of whether Bonhoeffer’s characterization of Barth is fair or not,⁴⁰ it is clear that the problem with „positivism of revelation” is – in Bonhoeffer’s view – that „virgin birth, Trinity etc.”, i.e. the mysteries which form the very content of the Christian creed, would be used as a means of religious propaganda, if they were cried out into the world untimely.

Bonhoeffer makes this very clear in his „Thoughts on the Day of Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge” (May 1944). Though he does not refer explicitly to the notion of „arcane discipline” there, the occasion itself – baptism! – makes the allusion clear enough. The situation of the child that is baptized without knowing anything about it is interpreted by Bonhoeffer as an example for the situation of all Christians in „the revolutionary times ahead”.⁴¹ Not only the child but all Christians „are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship – all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture any more to speak of them. In the traditional words and acts we suspect something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it.” Bonhoeffer emphasizes that this situation is „our own fault. Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of

³⁹ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 286 (transl. altered).

⁴⁰ The purported quotation „Like it, or lump it” (op. cit., 286) is certainly unfair.

⁴¹ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 295.

reconciliation and redemption to humanity and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among the people. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.” Therefore „the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair, but there will be those who pray and do right and wait for God’s own time.”⁴²

„Ultimate and penultimate” are to be distinguished. Prayer – this is the dimension of „mystery” in faith corresponding to the ultimate, which is not addressed to the public and therefore has to be submitted to the „arcane discipline”. Righteous action – this is the dimension of „obedience” in faith corresponding to the penultimate, the dimension of „the deed which interprets itself”, the dimension of political commitment within the „world come of age”. Therefore, non-religious Christianity or „profound this-worldliness”.⁴³ as the dialectical counterpoint correlated to the „arcane discipline” is the act of interpreting the traditional terms preserved in the „arcane” – „reconciliation and redemption” etc. – by the means of „righteous action”, i.e. doing justice, suffering for righteousness’ sake and sharing „the sufferings of God in the secular life”.⁴⁴

2.4. *Non-theological dimensions of the „arcane discipline”*

In his biography of Bonhoeffer Eberhard Bethge observes that the term „arcane discipline” „occurs only twice in the prison letters”. But he emphasizes that „the question of arcane discipline was not as peripheral for him as the infrequency of the phrase might suggest. His whole personality led him to put a protective screen around the central events of life.”⁴⁵ It seems that we can speak of a kind of emotional or psychological „arcane discipline” in Bonhoeffer’s personal life, which may have formed the background for his theological interest in „mystery”. Renate Bethge reports that „Bonhoeffer found in his family a reticence which he himself employed, too, but which was not common practice. This stimulated him again and again to reflect upon the function of silence.”⁴⁶ „In Bonhoeffer’s family it was the general expectation that there were things about which one did not talk and feelings which

⁴² D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 299f.

⁴³ D. Bonhoeffer, Letter to E. Bethge, July 21, 1944, op. cit., 369.

⁴⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, Letter to E. Bethge, July 18, 1944, op. cit., 361.

⁴⁵ E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 881.

⁴⁶ Renate Bethge, „Elite“ und „Schweigen“ in Bonhoeffers Denken und Persönlichkeit [„Elite“ and „Silence“ in Bonhoeffer’s Thought and Personality], epd-Dokumentation 2/3, 1981, 125. – Cf. also: R. Bethge, *Bonhoeffers Familie und ihre Bedeutung für seine Theologie. Beiträge zum Widerstand 1933-1945*, ed. by Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, H. 30, Berlin 1987.

one did not show.” However „emotions were not weak but strong in the family. By hardly talking about them their value was raised.”⁴⁷ We may recall in this context Bonhoeffer’s prison letter to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer (August 1944), where he warns: „It happens to be that certain things remain unsaid in my family ... I can imagine that at first it will be hard for you that many things, especially in religious matters, remain unexpressed at home.”⁴⁸

Renate Bethge adds a comment to this „reticence” in Bonhoeffer’s family: „Without practice in such secrecy it would have been impossible to get involved with conspiracy.”⁴⁹ It seems to be legitimate, therefore, to speak of „a kind of ‚political arcane discipline” with respect to Bonhoeffer’s participation in military conspiracy against Hitler and the Nazi government. The term „political arcane discipline” is used by the Bethges⁵⁰ with respect to a passage in Bonhoeffer’s *Drama* fragment written in prison, where dramatis persona Christoph notes: „I am speaking to you to protect from misuse the great words given to mankind ... Which well-meaning person can today bring himself to utter the degraded words freedom, brotherhood, and even *Germany* any longer? ... Let us honor the great values by silence for a time, let us learn to do what is just without words for a while.”⁵¹ In contrast to the theological „arcane discipline” the subject matter of the „political arcane discipline” would not be the „mysteries of faith” but political values like freedom, solidarity or nation. These values should no longer be used in terms of political propaganda, but they should be fought for without words.

It seems to be likely that Bonhoeffer’s involvement with conspiracy – a type of political commitment which cannot adequately be understood without the specific background of the virtues and traditions of his middle-class family – had reinforced his theological quest for a renewed arcane discipline in the prison correspondence with Eberhard Bethge. The theological interest in the „arcane” had been there

⁴⁷ R. Bethge, *ibid.*, 127; cf. also *ibid.*: „In this family you learned to talk about things silently or indirectly and to understand things said this way.”

⁴⁸ Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller, The other letters from prison, in: Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review, 1967, 25. – Cf. also: D. Bonhoeffer/ Maria von Wedemeyer, *Brautbriefe Zelle 92: 1943-1945*, ed. by Ruth-Alice von Bismarck u. Ulrich Kabitz, München 1992, 203.

⁴⁹ R. Bethge, „Elite“ und „Schweigen“, *epd-Dokumentation* 2/3, 1981, 126.

⁵⁰ R. and E. Bethge, Introduction, in: D. Bonhoeffer, *Fiction from Prison. Gathering Up the Past*, translated by U. Hoffmann, Philadelphia 1981, 11; cf. *ibid.*, 180, note 32: „a kind of secular, political dimension of the ‚arcane discipline”.

⁵¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Fiction from Prison*, 33f.

already at the begin of the thirties.⁵² But the urgency by which Bonhoeffer finally writes to Eberhard Bethge that „an arcane discipline must be restored whereby the *mysteries* of the Christian faith are protected against profanation”,⁵³ is due to the dramatic turns of his life which let him experience the value of family traditions like reticence and secrecy in situations, when he was forced to learn „to see the great events of world history from below”.⁵⁴

3. „Mystery“ and „Commandment“ in Leo Baeck and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Finally, let's have a comparative look upon Leo Baeck's way of dealing with the notion of „mystery”.⁵⁵ It was the late Albert H. Friedlander, who pointed out a certain affinity between Bonhoeffer's thinking and the polarity of „mystery and commandment“ in Leo Baeck, the famous liberal rabbi of Berlin during the Weimar period and „teacher of Theresienstadt“ in the times of the Holocaust.⁵⁶

Baeck had established a reputation, especially with his book *Das Wesen des Judentums* (*The Essence of Judaism*, 1905, 2nd revised edition 1922) before Bonhoeffer was born. This work was the most prominent Jewish response to the famous series of lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*), held by Bonhoeffer's later teacher Adolf von Harnack in the winter semester of 1899/1900. Baeck contrasted Judaism as the „classical religion of the act“ with Christianity as the „romantic religion of emotion”.⁵⁷ Whereas Christianity yearns for redemption, Judaism endeavours to improve the world. Baeck's book could have interested Bonhoeffer, who, especially after the fateful year of 1933, was more and more concerned with the „concreteness of the commandment“ and was unable to find satisfaction in the conclusion that „We don't know what we should do“.

⁵² It can also be found in Bonhoeffer's theological reflexions on „shame“ (cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall* [Creation and Fall], DBW 4, ed. by M. Rüter and I. Tödt, 2nd ed., Gütersloh 2002, 114-118; cf. also: D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 6ff., „The Love of God and the Decay of the World“; cf. also the letter to E. Bethge, november 27, 1943, in: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 146.).

⁵³ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 286.

⁵⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 17.

⁵⁵ Cf. Andreas Pangritz, 'Mystery and Commandment' in Leo Baeck and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in: *European Judaism. A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 30, no. 2, autumn 1997, issue no. 59, 44-57.

⁵⁶ Albert H. Friedlander, Israel and Europe, in: *Bonhoeffer's Ethics. Old Europe and New Frontiers*, eds. G. Carter et al., Kampen 1991, 117: „Baeck's teaching of classical religion against romantic religion, his vision of the commandment which leads to the mystery, of the mystery out of which the commandment must emerge, parallels the vision of Bonhoeffer.” – In his biography of Leo Baeck, Friedlander mentions Bonhoeffer at one juncture as evidence that the theological tradition of Lutheranism must be seen in a more differentiated light than in Baeck's polemic (cf. Albert H. Friedlander, *Leo Baeck: Teacher of Theresienstadt*, New York/Chicago/San Francisco, 1968, 271).

⁵⁷ Cf. Leo Baeck, Romantische Religion, in: Leo Baeck, *Aus drei Jahrtausenden. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen und Abhandlungen zur Geschichte des jüdischen Glaubens*, Tübingen 1958, 42-120.

But, as Bethge observes: „In contrast to the fame of Harnack’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* ... was the neglect accorded to Leo Baeck’s special way of joining the debate with his *Wesen des Judentums*.“⁵⁸

Later, under the influence of his study of Jewish mysticism, Baeck was to see the essence of Judaism „in a dialectical confrontation of mystery and commandment“, as he expounded it in an essay entitled „Mystery and Commandment“ in 1922.⁵⁹ In a sense this anticipates the dialectic of „arcane“ and „this-worldliness“ in Bonhoeffer’s prison theology. In his essay Baeck assumes „two experiences of the human soul in which the meaning of his life takes on for a man a vital significance: the experience of mystery and the experience of commandment“. ⁶⁰ Baeck quotes a pivotal sentence in Deuteronomy in support of this polarity: „That which is concealed belongs unto the Lord our God, but that which is revealed belongs unto us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this Torah“ (Deut. 29,29). We could also describe this duality as that of humanity’s relationship with God and with the world, of faith and ethics. Now, according to Baeck, the peculiarity of Judaism is „that these two experiences have here become one, and are experienced as one, in a perfect unity“. For: „from the one God come both mystery and commandment, as one from the One, and the soul experiences both as one“, so that „all faith“ means and suggests also „the law, and all law, faith“. ⁶¹ The consequence for Baeck is that „Judaism lacks any foundation for the conflict between transcendence and immanence“. For Jewish piety „there is no such thing as this world without any beyond, nor a beyond without this world; no world to come without the present world, and no human world without that which transcends it“. ⁶²

This calls to mind similar formulations by Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*: „God is beyond in the midst of our life ... That is how it is in the Old Testament, and in this sense we still read the New Testament far too little in the light

⁵⁸ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews, in: *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer’s Legacy to the Churches*, ed. by John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, New York and Toronto 1981, 52.

⁵⁹ Leo Baeck, Geheimnis und Gebot, in: *Der Leuchter: Weltanschauung und Lebensgestaltung. Jahrbuch der Schule der Weisheit*, ed. Count H. Keyserling, Vol. 3 (Darmstadt 1921-22); cited according to the English version: *Mystery and Commandment*, in: Leo Baeck, *Judaism and Christianity* (1958), translated with an introduction by Walter Kaufmann, Philadelphia 1960, 171-185.

⁶⁰ L. Baeck, op. cit., 171.

⁶¹ L. Baeck, op. cit., 173. – In Judaism „any opposition between mysticism and ethics has no place ... All ethics has its mysticism and all mysticism its ethics ... All absorption in the profundity of God is always also an absorption in the will of God and His commandment. And all Jewish ethics is distinguished by being an ethic of revelation ... it is the tidings of the divine“ (ibid., 175).

⁶² L. Baeck, op. cit. 174.

of the Old“, he writes to Eberhard Bethge (30 April, 1944).⁶³ And again: „What is above this world is, in the gospel, intended to exist *for* this world“ (5 May, 1944).⁶⁴ A day after the failed coup d'état against Hitler, he writes of „the profound this-worldliness of Christianity“: „I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness, characterised by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection“ (July 21, 1944).⁶⁵

The structural affinity of Bonhoeffer's „profound this-worldliness“ with Baeck's concept of Judaism is striking. Leo Baeck stresses that „the religion of mere activity without devotion – this religion which becomes an ethic of the surface, or no more than the custom of the day – is not Judaism. The world of Judaism is to be found only where faith has its commandment, and the commandment its faith.“⁶⁶

Again one can find structurally related thoughts in Bonhoeffer when he demands the restoration of an „arcane discipline“, a commitment of divine mystery that makes „true worldliness“ possible, or when he writes, in the „Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism“ of his grand-nephew (May 1944): „Our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and righteous action among human beings.“⁶⁷ Baeck expresses a similar view with regard to Judaism, when he writes of „the unity of devotion and deed“: „The commandment is a true commandment only because it is rooted in mystery, and the mystery is a true mystery because the commandment always speaks out of it.“⁶⁸

Furthermore, Baeck sees the „commandment of God“ as one „that leads into the future ... It contains a promise, it has a life that continually comes to life, it has a messianic aspect.“⁶⁹ Here again one is reminded of Bonhoeffer's „Thoughts on the Day of Baptism“, where he adds a „waiting for God's own time“ to the polarity of „prayer and righteous action“.⁷⁰ The promissory nature of the commandment should not be confused with withdrawal from the world or from the present. Baeck specifies

⁶³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 282.

⁶⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 286.

⁶⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, op. cit., 369.

⁶⁶ L. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, in: *Judaism and Christianity*, 176. – Cf. *ibid.*: „The religion of mere passivity, devoid of commandments, is no longer Judaism. Nor is Judaism to be found where the commandment is content with itself and is nothing but commandment.“

⁶⁷ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 300 (transl. altered).

⁶⁸ L. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, in: *Judaism and Christianity*, 178.

⁶⁹ L. Baeck, op. cit., 179f.

⁷⁰ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 300.

the messianic element in the commandment as God's „lasting covenant with man“: „Religion is not, in our case, a faith in redemption from the world and its demands, but rather – and this has often been called the realism of Judaism – trust in the world or, to be more precise, the assurance of reconciliation.“ „Redemption here is not redemption from the world, but in the world, consecration of the world, realisation of the kingdom of God.“⁷¹

Here, too, we find an exact parallel in Bonhoeffer. On 27 June 1944, he writes to Eberhard Bethge about his reading of the Old Testament: „Unlike the other oriental religions, the faith of the Old Testament isn't a religion of redemption. It's true that Christianity has always been regarded as a religion of redemption. But isn't this a cardinal error, which separates Christ from the Old Testament ...? ... The redemptions referred to here are *historical*, i.e. on *this* side of death, whereas everywhere else the myths about redemption are concerned to overcome the barrier of death. Israel is delivered out of Egypt so that it may live before God as God's people on earth.“ According to Bonhoeffer even the proclamation of „the hope of resurrection“ does not mean „the emergence of a genuine religion of redemption“. As he writes: „The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends a man back to his life on earth in a wholly new way ... This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testament are one.“⁷²

This is the background to Bonhoeffer's notorious critique of religion: „Faith“ for Bonhoeffer is „something whole, involving the whole of one's life“, whereas the „religious act“ seems to him to be „something partial“. However, Jesus „calls people, not to a new religion, but to life“. „To be a Christian“, therefore, „does not mean to be religious in a particular way ..., but to be a human being.“⁷³ Thus he writes in the last letter to Eberhard Bethge before the failed coup d'état on 18 July 1944.

In contrast to Bonhoeffer, Leo Baeck was not influenced by the new approach of „dialectical theology“ after World War I. In the tradition of liberal theology he did not hesitate to use the term „religion“ for his understanding of Judaism. But this understanding of it is in accord with what Bonhoeffer referred to as „non-religious Christianity“. Baeck writes: „Thus religion is everything here. It permeates the whole

⁷¹ L. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, in: *Judaism and Christianity*, 180f.

⁷² D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 336f. (24 June, 1944).

⁷³ D. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, 361f. (transl. altered).

of life ... Religion here is nothing isolated, nothing that is shut off; it does not exist only alongside our life or only under or above our life. There is no mystery outside of life and no life outside the commandment.“ The other side of the coin is the sanctification of the everyday world: „There is nothing left that could be called mere ‚world‘, and nothing set aside as basically merely ‚everyday‘; there is no mere prose of existence.“ Judaism „does not lead man out of his everyday world, but relates him to God within it“. ⁷⁴

Baeck makes this clear with reference to the Sabbath: „It is ... the recreation in which the soul, as it were, creates itself again and catches its breath of life ... The Sabbath is the image of the messianic; it proclaims the creation and the future ... A life without Sabbath would lack the spring of renewal.“ The Sabbath renders people „different“ among human beings: „Whoever experiences mystery and commandment becomes unique among men, different, an individual within the world ... Whoever experiences both, both in unity, lives in the world and yet is different.“ ⁷⁵

A Christianity that was once again to take cognisance of its Jewish roots would have a lesson to learn from such messianic non-conformity in the world. It seems that Bonhoeffer with his concentration upon the „mystery“ was a pioneer of such non-conformity for humanity's sake.

⁷⁴ L. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, in: *Judaism and Christianity*, 181f.

⁷⁵ L. Baeck, *op. cit.*, 184. – Cf. *ibid.*, 185: It is perhaps for this reason the „historic task“ of Judaism, „to offer this image of the dissenter, who dissents for humanity's sake“.