

»BY FAITHFUL, QUIET POWERS OF GOOD SURROUNDED?«

To Bear and to Master Misery – Illustrated by Luther and Bonhoeffer

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INTRODUCTION

›Theodicy‹, the question of the cause of evil and harm that befalls people for no apparent reason, has for all centuries and ages bothered people and still bothers us on a daily basis. How can we reconcile all that which is appalling in the world, including the concrete suffering which we encounter, with the idea of a benevolent and merciful God? Theodicy treats the subject of ›the justification of God facing the tribunal of human reason in view of the evil in creation.«¹ Or, to reword it differently, and more understandably, theodicy asks the difficult question: How can God allow pain and suffering? Confronted with suffering, pain, war, torture, murder, disease and death – can we or how can we as human beings conceive God's presence, God's existence in the world at all?

I have decided not to pursue this issue by presenting you with different theological concepts throughout church history. Instead I'd like to approach it less intellectually and more existentially. I'll rather present you two examples of how two figures from church history in existentially distressing situations tried to find answers to the question of how to live with God during suffering. First there is Martin Luther: For him there was no doubt that the merciful God accepts us alone by faith just for Christ's sake (*propter Christum*). Even after serious trials and temptations he could build on this conviction his outlook of life, faith and theological teachings.² Martin Luther dealt with these matters in a deeply existential manner. In order to comprehend him, first of all it is indispensable to clarify his

¹ Lecture on 12/3/2014 Tel Aviv University. A longer German version of this text was published in: Thomas Naumann and Annette Kurschus, eds., *Wo ist denn nun euer Gott? Von Gottes Anwesenheit in einer unordentlichen Welt*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2010), 9–22.

² Cf. e.g. Martin Luther, ›Sermo De duplici iustitia/Sermon über die zweifache Gerechtigkeit,‹ in *Christusglaube und Rechtfertigung* (ed. J. Schilling; vol. 2 of Martin Luther: Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe, ed. W. Härle; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 68–85.

relationship to the Bible as well as his interpretation of it. He has given practical instructions in numerous pastoral writings concerning how to deal with experienced suffering. Some of these considerations I would like to present, supplemented by some statements mentioned in his sermons. The Reformation-based perspective is complemented, additionally, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, proponent of resistance and ultimately a martyr of the Protestant Church. I'll present how he determined his relationship with God, confronted with imprisonment and imminent death and therefore gave an implicit response to the handling of personal suffering.

In the following I will describe two points of view which present a small part of the history of piety, serving as examples of how Christians have constantly struggled with this issue and which answers they have found.

I. MARTIN LUTHER

Luther - from today's perspective - was less an exegete or historical-critical Bible teacher and more an emotional interpreter of what the Bible revealed him by oratio (prayer), meditatio (meditation) and tentatio (contestation). Luther came to Wittenberg as a young seeker and anxious monk, but not as an intellectual or scholar.³ First of all there is the fact that Luther in his way was passionate, spontaneous and emotional - even in his biblical interpretations - in a way that would be understood as inappropriate nowadays by contemporary academics and scholars. Or in other words: Luther worked quite scholarly, indeed, and this scholarship also influenced his faith; however, interpretation of scripture meant more to him than analyzing texts on basis of certain standards. The example of Luther's interpretation of the Bible shows the impact of theology and living faith working together for the sake of coping with the world. So looking at Luther - taking into account how he was challenged by the world's chaos and confusion - can demonstrate how one can live in the fullest sense of the word, and - perhaps more important - how one can learn to deal with loss, pain, and suffering.

Luther was interested in a scholarly-based research of the scripture - but his understanding of the Bible was always existentially based on his personal relationship to God. Therefore, his biblical interpretations are extremely vivid. With regard to his publications, he would be considered an exegete, most of all an exegete of the Old Testament. On the 19th of October, 1512, Luther graduated from the University of Wittenberg as a doctor of theology. His professorship was as a *Lectura in Biblia*, meaning that he was professionally engaged with the interpretation of the Bible. He exclusively held lectures about Biblical texts.

³ Cf. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Munich: dtv, 1986), 171-184.

His religious and theological life history is tied up with the interpretation of the Bible and would be unthinkable without it – as seen in his central discovery of God's justice in Romans as justifying grace. As the central topic of the Scriptures he then determines to be the assurance of the Gospel (*promissio*) and as its core or centre Jesus Christ.

In the preface to vol.1 of the Wittenberg edition of the German writings, edited in 1539, Luther names three principles by which it is possible to recognize the truth of the Holy Scriptures: *Oratio* (prayer), *Meditatio* (meditation) and *tentatio* (contestation/temptation).⁴ That means that these steps are absolutely essential for an appropriate interpretation of the Scriptures. The absolute singular position of the Bible in relation to other writings is emphasized first when Luther writes:

»firstly, you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone. Therefore you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding. With them you will not attain eternal life, but, on the contrary, your presumptuousness will plunge you and others with you out of heaven (as happened to Lucifer) into the abyss of hell. But kneel down in your little room [Matt 6:6] and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding.«⁵ It is emphasized that one's own contemplation and reason initially don't accomplish anything, at least with regard to the understanding of the Bible. Instead, the human will has to ask humbly in prayer for the Holy Spirit.

This anti-intellectualist approach is directed against scholastic theology. But Luther does not mean that it would be sufficient to ask for the Spirit. He rather emphasizes that for the next step the Scriptures have to be meditated. This means that the exegete has to deal with the meaning of the word, and should be informed philologically and historically as well, in order to follow the Holy Spirit. The Bible has its own terminology to be understood. The linguistic form of the biblical word is nothing neutral, but is given theological quality. Since 1524 this background information has increasingly gained importance for Luther. Take for example his remark that understanding the prophet Isaiah would be impossible without knowing the political geography and the historical circumstances of that time. The interpreter of the Bible can reasonably be expected to be informed about this background when struggling to find the right way of understanding the text. He would hence ultimately affirm the methodical steps of a critical exegesis of the Scripture. It is important to realize that the pious Bible teacher Luther is not re-

⁴ Weimarer Ausgabe (WA) 50, 658–661; Helmut T. Lehmann and Lewis W. Spitz, eds., Luther's Works (vol. 34/IV, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1960), 34.283–288 (WL).

⁵ WA 50, 659, Englisch in: WL 34.283–288.

jecting a critical analysis of the Scripture, but is taking it for an important precondition for the true understanding of the text.

Finally, the last principle of interpretation of Scripture, and maybe the most difficult one to understand but the deepest as well, is the temptation/contestation (*tentatio/Anfechtung*). In Luther's words: »This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.«⁶ Just by being challenged, people will learn rightly to seek the word of God and to love it. Luther is illustrating this through his own person: He has to thank the »Papists« for frightening and battering and harassing him so much with the fear of sin and hell that he has become a pretty good theologian. This statement reveals experiences that Luther had as a monk, constantly feeling his own inadequacy before God. God was the punitive and judging God, before whose demands people could never continue to exist as a sinner. The only attitude remaining for him at that time was absolutely humble contrition. This is why it entailed an existential turn for him, when studying the Epistle of the Romans, that this justice should be understood as a righteousness of *God* who *justifies man by grace through Christ*, and will accept him because of pure mercy alone (*sola gratia*). This insight becomes the starting point of all his interpretation of Scripture from 1518 on. It is a deeply intensive handling of the Scripture which led Luther to the experience of justification and enabled him to understand God's gracious justice. This assumption is central for understanding how Luther deals with the problematic nature of theodicy. It is based on this experience, the temptation/contestation overcome through Christ and the certainty about the merciful grace of God.

Even Luther is aware that one has no faith in God all of a sudden, but instead has to learn it through constant use of the Bible. *Oratio*, *meditatio* and *tentatio* are currently stances of life, which will have to be spelled constantly again. The messiness of the world – which Luther was afraid of – could only be overcome by intensive praying, meditation on the Scriptures and leading a life against permanent rising temptation caused by suffering. Christ has the central role as mediator. All who suffer should feel themselves close to Christ, as he has suffered himself and ultimately overcome pain.

Luther emphasizes that, while suffering, God's nearness cannot be felt, but one will still have to believe in Him. Luther's exegesis of the Magnificate in 1520/21 states the following:

»So he keeps the pious powerless and oppressed, assuming that this was their end now, all comes to pass and even in this he will be strongest, but unseen and secretly hidden, so that even those who suffer the oppression, don't feel it, but only believe in God's power and His outstretched arm. [...] For where man's strength ends, God's

⁶ WA 50, 660; WL 34.283–288.

strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. [...] See, Christ was powerless on the cross and yet there He did His mightiest work and overcame sin, death, hell, devil and all evil. Thus all the martyrs have been strong and have overcome. Furthermore all the suffering and oppressed will overcome.«⁷

For Luther suffering means to become conformed to Christ, which doesn't ease the situation as such – the nearness of God will not be there automatically, it has to be believed. According to Luther, that is the important and central fact: Neither my suffering nor that of others is in vain and it also doesn't mean the remoteness of or abandonment by God. Here my faith means rather that I will overcome my suffering, because I am suffering with Christ.

In the Sermon about preparation for dying, Luther insistently stresses that each Christian has – through Christ – received everything necessary for dying:

»See now, what more should God do to persuade you to accept death willingly and not to dread but to overcome it. He shows and gives you the image of life, grace, salvation so that you may not be horrified by the images of sin, death and hell. He additionally places your death, your sin, your hell on his most dear son and overcomes them for you and renders them harmless for you. He further allows your *Anfechtung* (=temptation/contestation) of death, sin, hell to go over to his son, and teaches you how to respond to them and makes them not only harmless but bearable. He gives you of all this a sure sign, to relieve you of all doubt, namely, the holy sacraments. He commands his angels, all saints, all creatures to join him in watching over you, to be concerned about your soul and to receive it. He commands you to ask him for this and to be assured that you will be heard. What more can or should he do? Why, then, should he not impose something big upon you (such as dying), as long as he adds to it great benefits, help and strength, and thereby wants to test the power of his grace?«⁸

This means that while in the process of dying, only God, Christ and the sacrament assure the presence of God. These are the powers that allow the Christian to endure the contestation of dying. Christ, the angels and saints will look at the dying person and receive the soul when it leaves the body. Here the Christian is totally resigned to God's will and doesn't ask questions any longer, but instead unquestioningly accepts everything as being from the hand of God, because he or she has internalized the mysteries of faith, life and the death of Christ *pro me*.

⁷ Martin Luther, »Magnificat«, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia, Fortress Press 1958) vol. 21, 295–355, 301.

⁸ Quoted by Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: the ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Hampshire: Routledge, 2006), 73–74.

II. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Now, based on Bonhoeffer's poems during his imprisonment, I would like to show how Dietrich Bonhoeffer interpreted and coped with his fate in the ten poems written during the short period between June 1944 and December 1944. As sources I use, firstly, vol. 8 of the Bonhoeffer Complete Edition, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (In German entitled *Widerstand und Ergebung*: literally, »Resistance and Surrender«), and secondly Bonhoeffer's *Love Letters from Cell 92*. These are the letters which were exchanged between Bonhoeffer's fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer and Bonhoeffer and that were published in 1993 for the first time. For this part of the essay I have particularly benefited from a monograph by the practical theologian Jürgen Henkys published in 2005.⁹ Important theological concepts of Bonhoeffer can be found in the poems, and these especially articulate a piety which can be linked to his biography. It is this piety which ultimately carried him through the time spent in prison and which he had to further develop there in order to survive spiritually.

During imprisonment in 1944 Bonhoeffer created four genres of written work: 1. Biblical interpretation, 2. Contributions to ethics, 3. Theological drafts about crisis and opportunity of the Christian faith in the modern age and 4. Poems. These poems are partially implementations of Bonhoeffer's idea, developed in 1944, of a non-religious, a mature Christianity, which requires a secular interpretation of biblical terms and Christian truths. Here one encounters a language which is not based on theological terms, and which sparingly uses words such as faith, revelation, and God's kingdom, and which consciously avoids this terminology in favor of a fresh language which touches and reaches people in the present, even those who are usually distanced from Christianity and the church.

The poems are apparently an important vent to transcend the experiences of imprisonment, that is to place them in front of God or, in other words: the poems interpret his own life and experience in a way that is inseparably related to his God. They reveal his relation to God, and this is why I would consider the term »piety« to be a central interpretive category for Bonhoeffer's lyrical work.

In these poems one can find the Christian Bonhoeffer who doesn't want to be a saint and a martyr, but someone who would have liked to immerse himself even more in the deep this-worldliness of life.

Ferdinand Schlingensiefen, who in 1985 published the monograph »The moment of truth – Faith and fact in the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer« makes the following judgment about this work: »In Tegel Bonhoeffer finds a new form of language,

⁹ Cf. Jürgen Henkys, *Geheimnis der Freiheit. Die Gedichte Dietrich Bonhoeffers aus der Haft: Biographie – Poesie – Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

the poetry. [...] Theology and biography are fused together in them.«¹⁰ This new form corresponds to a new discovery: God is not an abstract power, but is linked to the suffering of man, and is comforting and consoling. It is a God who allows one to complain about lost life. He can be found in shared solidarity between people. Only this God makes it possible to live on and ultimately to die.

Bonhoeffer's first poem is initially a hot-blooded outburst of emotion, in which he complains about the lost past. It is the despair of the imprisoned one who knows that he has left a normal life behind, and who is mourning this fact.

»The Past

You left, beloved bliss and pain so hard to love.
 What shall I call you? Life, Anguish, Ecstasy,
 My Heart, of my own self a part - the past?
 The door slammes shut and locked,
 I hear your steps depart, resound, then slowly fade.
 What remains for me? Joy, torment, longing?
 I know just this: You left - and all is past.

Do you feel how I reach for you now,
 how I clutch you as with claws,
 so tightly that it must hurt?
 How I wound your flesh
 till your blood oozes out,
 just to be assured you are near,
 you bodily, earthly fullness of life?

Do you sense my terrible longing for pain of my own?
 that I yearn to see my own blood
 just so that all will not fade away
 into the past?«¹¹

Bonhoeffer sends this poem in a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge, and tells him that he is describing the severity of saying farewell - saying goodbye to a past where he should have lived an almost normal conventional life, in which a marriage would have naturally been a part of his life. It is the lament of a man who is left behind in prison, having no hope to win back an earthly, beloved life and a marriage. The poem articulates the certainty of not being abandoned by God. In prayer the past is eternal and inerasably in good hands - but this knowledge must be gained under pain. The poem reveals that Bonhoeffer himself would prefer to

¹⁰ Cf. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Im Augenblick der Wahrheit: Glaube und Tat im Leben Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 42.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 419-420.

hold on to the this-worldliness of earthly life, that he wants to be neither a saint nor a martyr. Serene and worldly-wise appears his last poem, ›By good powers‹, from December 1944, in which he articulates the hope for a reunion in eternity. Now he accepts every way that God provides for him. In his letters to Maria during this time he begs her to persist, to wait for him, to reconcile herself to the situation. Which she did.

He wrote to his friend that a Christian should totally live life to the fullest – only then would the crucified and risen Lord be with him. In the poem ›Past‹ it becomes clear that Bonhoeffer would have loved to make the most of his life, and that he apparently fought hard for his way of farewell. He would have preferred to live a normal life and enjoyed earthly this-worldliness.

The poems ›Who am I‹ and ›Night Voices in Tegel‹ reflect the situation in prison. The prisoner comes to terms with his new situation, not giving up however, but taking his new life as a new task for himself. This task consists of lived solidarity with the other prisoners. The poem ›Who am I‹ shows that Bonhoeffer has found himself in a role: Others would look upon him as being cheerful, relaxed, coming out of his prison cell like a landlord out of his castle, while he himself was quarreling and feeling like a caged bird, tired and empty. But even this poem concludes with a conciliatory ending:

»Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!«¹²

Dorothee Sölle has called these last lines of the poem a ›mystical surrender‹. She writes: »I hesitate to use the word ›surrender‹ in this context. But that just shows the stupidity of our thinking, as if surrender is for women only (or mystics), while men would always be conquerors, winners or recipients.«¹³ The prayer indeed surrenders himself to God.

The final lines of the poem ›Night Voices in Tegel‹ show that Bonhoeffer holds on tight to the inner-worldliness of life, even in this situation, in solidarity with his fellow prisoners and not giving up hope. It is a political poem, naming the wickedness and guilt of National Socialism. It expresses lived solidarity with his fellow prisoners and promises them the future glory in the kingdom of God, indirectly and without pathos. It emphasizes the idea of brotherhood: Those who struggled against the iniquitous regime will never be forgotten, and the day – and thus the kingdom of God – once will dawn to them, after a long night:

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 460.

¹³ Dorothee Sölle, *Die Hinreise: Zur religiösen Erfahrung: Texte und Überlegungen* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag 1975), 151.

»[...] First morning light creeps through my window
 pale and gray,
 Light wind blows over my forehead
 summerly mild.
 »Summer day!« I just say, »beautiful summer day!
 What would it like to bring to me?«
 Then I hear hasty steps out there.
 Coming suddenly to stop just near to me.
 I feel cold and hot as well,
 I know, oh, I know!
 A quiet voice reads something piercingly and cold.
 Keep calm, brother, soon you will have it finished,
 soon, soon!
 I hear you walking with courageous and proudly steps.
 you would not see today's world any longer,
 but future times.
 I'll go with you, brother, to that place,
 and I hear your last word:
 »Brother, if the sun is fading for me,
 You would live for me!«

Stretched out on my cot
 I gaze at the gray wall.
 A summer morning rises outside, whooping with joy
 which would not yet be mine,
 Brothers, until after a long night
 our day will dawn,
 we will resist!«¹⁴

In this poem of solidarity, something is indicated that finally culminates in the theological didactic poem »Christians and pagans«: Since Christ has saved the world and mankind, it is the duty of Christians to follow Christ by trying to live in solidarity, standing solidly at the place where they are. To be a Christian does not merely express itself through worship and church membership, but rather also in this solidarity. The last stanza reads:

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung. Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (ed. E. Bethge; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, ³1985), 388 f. Translation U.G., cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 469.

»God goes to all people in their need,
fills body and soul with God's own bread,
goes for Christians and heathens to Calvary's death
and forgives them both«¹⁵

CLOSING

Let me conclude by turning to Bonhoeffer's last and most famous poem. It is a very personal testimony. It is the last poem that Bonhoeffer wrote and is dedicated to his fiancée and his family. Bonhoeffer, when writing it, had by now given up on all possible escape plans. He had been brought to a cell in the Berlin »*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*« in October 1944. In the Zossen files evidence was found which would now heavily incriminate Bonhoeffer.

»By faithful, quiet powers of good surrounded
So wondrously consoled and sheltered here -
I wish to live these days with you in spirit
And with you enter into a new year.

The old year still would try our hearts to torment,
of evil times we still do bear the weight;
O Lord, do grant our souls, now terror-stricken,
salvation for which you did us create.

And should you offer us the cup of suffering,
through heavy, brimming full and bitter brand,
we'll thankfully accept it, never flinching,
from your good heart and your beloved hand.

But should you wish now once again to give us
the joys of this world and its glorious sun,
then we'll recall anew what past times brought us
and then our life belongs to you alone.«¹⁶

I will not interpret the poem in all its facets. I just want to point out a few basic ideas that have already been indicated in the other poems and now appear again and are thought to their conclusion.

A central idea appears again: It is the idea of solidarity - in this case with the good powers. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer these are the saints and angels surrounding

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 461.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 549-550.

him. But there are not just the angels that watch over him during his life but also the people accompanying him during his imprisonment with prayers, letters, with thoughts and their visits as well. In the accompanying letter to Maria it reads:

»You, yourself, my parents – all of you including my friends and students on active service – are my constant companions. Your prayers and kind thoughts, passages from the Bible, long-forgotten conversations, pieces of music, books – all are invested with life and reality as never before. I live in a great, unseen realm of whose real existence I'm in no doubt. The old children's song about the angels says ›two to cover me, two to wake me,‹ and today we grown-ups are no less in need than children of preservation, night and morning, by kindly, unseen powers.«¹⁷

»The ›good powers‹ are people, God's people, the communion of saints who do an angel's duty. From them Bonhoeffer hears ›the high praise‹ which strengthens him while being isolated from them.«¹⁸ The idea of solidarity and friendship and love between people is central when it comes to dealing with suffering.

Even if the old, past year was full of hardship and distress, there remains the certain hope that God does not withhold his salvation. A cry for help turns directly to God. Nevertheless, Dietrich Bonhoeffer knows as well that God's ways are mysterious. According to his belief that the Christians are formed equal to God in suffering and have to wrestle with Jesus in Gethsemane for the Yes to death, he agrees to this task. He is ready to die. This devotion to God reveals itself by and by in the ten poems.

Faith does not separate humans but leads them into community. Despite all the violence experienced in prison, facing most likely death, Dietrich Bonhoeffer holds on to being aware of the feeling of comfort by God for himself and his relatives. »This feeling of security and comfort doesn't stand and fall with earthly happiness or unhappiness, with the loss or gain of things hoped for, because they are anchored in God's eternal faithfulness.«¹⁹

The central point of faith in God is for both Luther and Bonhoeffer: To be certain of the grace and mercy of God and of Jesus Christ, and that this hope will enable Christians to bear suffering and death. This is not a trivial resumé. Rather, the example of Bonhoeffer shows that this faith has to be gained existential-

¹⁷ Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz, eds., *Love Letters from cell 92: The Correspondence between Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer 1943-45* (London: Harper-Collins, 1994), 268-269.

¹⁸ Ulrich Laepple, »Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen«. Hinweise zu Entstehung, Inhalt und Gebrauch des Bonhoefferschen Gedichts,« *PGP Mitteilungen* 151 (2007): 109-117, 111.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

ly. It is not a scholarly discovery or an intellectual theology, but a point of view won by faith.