

God is weak

”God is weak” – a relation between Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reflections in prison and Martin Luther’s theology of the cross.

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“God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer 16 July 1944 in his letter to Eberhard Bethge, his friend.

The 38-year-old theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is isolated in the military section of Tegel Prison in Berlin. He was there the first 18 months of his confinement. This was from 5 April 1943 until 8 October 1944.

In the beginning his letters were all passing through the prison censorship. In six months Bonhoeffer had made many good friends among the warders and also among the prison hospital orderlies that he was allowed to enter an extensive correspondence, partly by letter, partly by scraps of paper. This correspondence was mainly addressed to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, whom he first met as his student at the pastoral seminar in Finkenwalde already 1935.

Bonhoeffer and Bethge developed a deep friendship through the years. They went on several journeys together. They often shared bedrooms, both in Berlin and in other places. They had both failed to find a woman of their lives. This might have been the reason for their first encounter with each other, the joint disappointment of having not succeeded in finding a woman to share their lives.

Afterwards there have been speculations of their relation. Bonhoeffer bequeathed more or less all his belongings to Bethge in spite of being engaged to the young woman Maria von Wedemeyer. Were they, Bonhoeffer and Bethge, living as a homosexual couple? Many years later Bethge got the question and answered that they both were pretty straight. But with the language used nowadays, he said, one might call their friendship homoerotic.

Now back to the letters from prison.

There were rules to be observed for the prison correspondence. Notices on certain persons in dangerous positions had to be hidden, the progress of the resistance movement and the investigations into his own case had to be made in code. This correspondence went on until 20 July 1944, the date for the attempt on Hitler’s life. But even after that day letters continued although soon Bonhoeffer was transferred to the headquarters of Gestapo at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse in October 1944. Thereafter the correspondence almost ceased with a few exceptions.

The letter 16 July 1944 is written only a few days before the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler’s life 20 July 1944. We know that this attempt deeply influenced Bonhoeffer. Before 20 July 1944 he kept much hope for freedom. After that date he was clearly aware of the possibility of a death sentence.

Only four days before the attempt Bonhoeffer begins a struggle with himself. He starts to develop “a non-religious interpretation of biblical terminology”. He says in the beginning of the letter “it’s a far bigger job than I can manage at the moment”. Still he continues.

One might think that in such a struggle it would be tempting to search for a God with power, a God who could once and for all defeat the humiliating National Socialism, the politics of Adolf Hitler.

Bonhoeffer does the opposite.

For him God is weak and powerless in the world.

He searches in the Bible for pictures of the powerless God.

He means that religiosity may lead to a God of power in the world. That is a God similar to the Antique concept of “the God from the machine”, *deus ex machina*.

This expression - “the God from the machine” - has its background in the Antique dramas. After complicated love adventures in these dramas the situation finally was often immense and incalculable. At the end of the drama they often showed a picture of the God, which slowly came down to the scene from a machine. When this picture of God came, all problems were solved. The God from the machine solved everything and the public could happily return home.

In our Christian tradition we have no God who solves all our problems. The Bible has no room for such a God.

We could say in an almost brutal way that human beings according to our biblical texts are obliged to find their solutions themselves. There is no assurance of a final way out.

Christian faith is about something else. According to St Matthews the last words Jesus said were the following: “I am with you always, to the end of time” (Matthew 28,20). This is a **promise of divine presence, not of divine solutions.**

Bonhoeffer writes in the letter 16 July 1944: “The Bible however directs him [sc. man] to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help”. You may say that Bonhoeffer here maintains that in the powerlessness of God there is in reality the help which women and men need. But at the end there is no help in powerful positions. Only weakness can open the deepest room for human beings. Only in the fragility human beings may find their deepest identity.

This also means that God forces human beings to live in the world as if there was no God, “*etsi deus non daretur*”.

But what does Bonhoeffer mean with this? It has to be said, that we do not know exactly what he meant. Many of his statements in the letters from prison are never explained in detail. We have to find out ourselves.

I would say that human beings cannot blame God for there own deeds. They have to take responsibility of their own lives. The followers of Jesus Christ do pray and Bonhoeffer is a friend of prayers. But the prayers can never be looked upon as an excuse for or a defence of human decisions.

In pious traditions there have been a language of “spiritual guidance”. It may be used in different ways, but it could be used in a dangerous way, making the own decisions more or less divine authorized with many prayers. History can show cruel examples of this tradition.

Now the coming of age may imply that women and men can get along very well without God. The God, who at all times is with human beings, is the God who forsakes. This is a difficult fact. No human being can ever live without God. Still it is a fact that human beings experience the abandonment, the situation when God forsakes.

Bonhoeffer writes in our letter from 16 July 1944: “Before God and with God we live without God. God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross.”

Human beings will always live before God and with God, regardless of faith and belief. It is simply impossible for any human being to choose a position outside God. But in this world where God is present everywhere God wants women and men to live responsible and honest, as if God did not exist.

On the cross God is weak. Christ suffers and dies. It is a real fragility and brokenness. The spiritual power is hidden in the powerlessness in the world. This does not mean that the suffering or weakness is less. It is a brutal weakness, which breaks down the body of Christ.

But here on the cross human beings see our God as God is.

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Now I assert that a similar pattern can be found in the lives of every woman and man.

In human weakness human beings come closer to themselves, to their real life. In the weakness, in the fragility, it becomes more and more clear that Life is greater. No woman and no man can control her or his life. No woman and no man own her or his life. Life belongs to God. **Life is always greater than the individual.** It is often more clear in the fragility that the life is a gift. When all the possibilities to control the own life are gone the nakedness remains. There in the very weak moment of human existence it is easier to accept the thought that the life is greater than any separate person. The Christian tradition will say that life is a gift by God.

In the weakness the insight grows that the greatest in life is the most fragile, that which easily is broken. And that is in reality the real strength.

I mean that this pattern is obvious for everyone. We may think of love between human beings – so easily damaged and still of decisive importance for life. We may think of friendship, confidence, care, relations – all that easily may be turned to its opposites.

Close to life human beings’ fragility is uncovered, but that fragility is the real strength. Close to life human beings come close to God, the God who reveals himself in weakness and suffering.

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I now want to turn to the theology of the cross in Martin Luther’s thinking.

In the Heidelberg disputation in April 1518 Martin Luther offered some theses. One of them is this:

“A theologian of glory call evil good, and good evil.”

This statement may not really look trustworthy. Who ever may say such things as an honest theologian?

For Luther this is a description of a conviction where God has won the battle over all the evil powers and his might is therefore obvious for each one who wants to see.

That means that all the followers of Jesus Christ already live in the glory of God. The Christian woman and man live in a spiritual world, untainted by this sinful world. They live in the glory of God. The suffering of this world may occur, the evil events may come, but the follower of Jesus Christ lives in another world and is therefore fundamentally liberated from the evils of this world.

In this way Luther will call those theologians of the glory liars. They speak of this world without honesty, without taking the problems of this world seriously. For them the inner world is anyway unbroken and glorious. They accept two perspectives of their existence. In the outer world evil things may occur. In the inner world God has already won the struggle and got all his followers into the glory. For Martin Luther this is a false story, a dishonest way of telling the history of human beings.

“A theologian of the cross”, continues Martin Luther, “calls the thing what it actually is.” For Luther the main difference between the theology of the glory and the theology of the cross is a question of the **understanding of power**. The theologians of the glory understand the divine power in the Scriptures as the political power of contemporary society. They may presume that the divine power is a multiplying and exaggerating version of the human power. This is inadequate and simply not true.

Only the theology of the cross will bring the human being to reality, force to face facts, what really happens, and give an understanding of what happens. The theology of the cross will underline the fragility in the suffering and mean that real life is uncovered in this way. So it was in the suffering and death of Christ. So it is with all the followers of Christ.

For Martin Luther the theology of the cross does not imply a denial of the vocation. In some Lutheran reflection the theology of the cross has been interpreted as a Christo monistic view of the human existence, almost in the spirit of Karl Barth, the reformed theologian of the 20th Century. But for Martin Luther the belief in God’s Creation as the first word of God is essential.

In a rather different way of thinking than Barth Martin Luther develops his theology of vocation in the everyday life, a theology where the cross or the crosses have an important role to play.

In the everyday life where every human being regardless of faith and belonging live as a co-worker of God, *cooperatores dei*, every human being is called by God to give his or her life for the neighbour, to live in love.

Some will mean that Luther assumed that all were Christians of his time. That is simply not true. Luther was writing about the Turks, the yellow danger, the Muslims of that time. He will explain that every woman and man is called by God to live in love. And if the human being does not want to do the deeds of love, God will force them to do it. Therefore everybody does accomplish good deeds, even sinless deeds. The people, who do not want, are forced by God to do it.

Luther does give examples from the Turkish world. It is of course examples with the medieval perspective. He says that a Turkish woman would never refuse her infant baby the food. She will breast-feed the baby. This act, the breast-feeding, is an act of pure love. It is sinless. The healthy woman has no calculating thoughts, no egoistic thoughts, in this act. The fact that even the Turkish women do breast-feed is a clear example of the sinless acts that all human beings do.

This view of human beings may even today liberate into a respect for all people.

The deeds of the human beings are better than themselves, according to Luther.

In this world of vocations God sends the crosses. In front of the crosses every woman and man meet the fragility, the weakness, the real life.

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There is according to my conviction a similarity between the thoughts of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his letters from prison in the 1940's and the theology of the cross, as developed by Martin Luther in his writings. This connection may be explained by the fact that Bonhoeffer was an eager reader of Luther's texts. If Dietrich Bonhoeffer is to be called a Lutheran theologian or not is another question. My opinion is clear. Bonhoeffer is more influenced by Luther than by any other theologian.

He never criticised Martin Luther in the way he criticised other theologians, for instance Karl Barth. For every Lutheran theologian it is however necessary to criticise Luther not at least for his anti-Semitism but also for his feudal view of the Princes' commissions to brutally kill the peasants in the uprising 1524/1525.

For me Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a theologian who struggles with the conditions of real life, the conditions decisive for every man, the conditions which with necessity will involve weakness, fragility, suffering.

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