

Dietrich Bonhoeffer : ‘The Trials of our Times’

Martin Spence revisited Bonhoeffer at the Progressive Christianity Network Conference held in Salford in November 2019.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been celebrated as a ‘modern martyr’ for many years. Here in the UK his theology inspired John Robinson’s *Honest to God* in the 1960s, and he is remembered in effigy at Westminster Abbey and St. Alban’s Cathedral. But despite this widespread recognition, he is a thinker about whom there has never been a settled consensus.

One of the urgent questions he posed in his last months in prison, before his execution by the Nazis in 1945, was: ‘Who is Christ actually, for us, today?’. In this question, context is all. Bonhoeffer did not posit Christ as an abstract or other-worldly figure fixed by doctrine; but as passionately engaged with the present moment, with a suffering ‘world come of age’, a world which has outgrown traditional religious forms but which still needs a ‘religionless Christianity’. But these ambiguous phrases were coined in Bonhoeffer’s last months, and he never had time to clarify their full meanings or implications.

The one-day ‘Bonhoeffer Conference’ in Salford in November was an opportunity to revisit these questions. There were five very different speakers. David Benjamin Blower talked about the mid-twentieth-century encounter between theology and political theory, evident not just in Bonhoeffer but also in the writings of the Marxist Walter Benjamin. Sally Mann picked up on Bonhoeffer’s contempt for the mainstream German church of his day with its ‘cheap grace and discipleship’, and counter-posed it to ‘costly discipleship’ which works with the poor and challenges injustice. Noel Irwin addressed Bonhoeffer’s ethics, including his involvement in the 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler. He interpreted Bonhoeffer’s ethics as ‘context-driven’, while also recognising that this is a slippery slope. And Steve Chalk argued that Bonhoeffer’s concern with worldly justice was inspired by his contact with the poor black congregation at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, which he knew as a visiting student.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)

The single most impressive speaker, though, was Rachel Mann. Trans woman, Anglican priest, poet and theologian, she spoke for 45 minutes without notes, with clarity and humour, on poetry in general and Bonhoeffer’s poetry in particular. She focused on the line: ‘Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving’ to argue for Bonhoeffer’s ‘this-worldliness’, his vision of a Christianity rooted in everyday human experience.

‘This-worldliness’ is indeed at the heart of Bonhoeffer’s theology. ‘This-worldliness’ is clearly implied by his references to a ‘world come of age’ and ‘religionless Christianity’. But it is all too easy to mis-read these terms through the crude but familiar filter of ‘religion versus secularism’; in fact there were several references to ‘Bonhoeffer’s secularism’ during the conference. This is quite wrong. He was no secularist. He was far more interesting, and challenging, than that.

We have already encountered the question which, for Bonhoeffer, was absolutely central. It was not an abstract question but a personal one. It

was not the philosopher's question 'Why?' or the scientist's question 'How?', but the question asked by a friend or lover: 'Who?'. And specifically: 'Who is *Christ*?' We have seen that he was asking this question in the last weeks of his life in 1945, but by this time he had already been asking it for many years, at least since 1933.

And over the years he offered various answers: Christ is 'for me' (*pro me*); Christ is 'community'; Christ is 'one whose only concern is for others'. In his final writings he argued that this concern for others *constitutes* Christ's 'transcendence', which is close to saying that it constitutes Christ's divinity. And he said that we too can share in this transcendence insofar as we 'exist for others' by attending to 'the nearest thing to hand', to the other people around us.

This is a profoundly dialectical conception. 'Transcendence' is usually counter-posed to 'immanence', just as 'religion' is counter-posed to 'secularism'. But by starting with the question 'Who?', by starting with a personal encounter, Bonhoeffer cuts through these abstract binaries. He offers us an immanent transcendence, a transcendence springing from everyday human concern. This ought to be a contradiction in terms, but he insists that it isn't. In the same way, his conception of 'religionless Christianity' denies

the sterile opposition of religion to secularism, offering instead a this-worldliness shot through with transcendent meaning. Again, it ought to be a contradiction in terms, but Bonhoeffer insists that it isn't.

I'm not a Christian. I don't share Bonhoeffer's starting point, so when he asks 'who is Christ for us today?', I cannot share the depth of intense personal commitment which that particular question carried for him. And yet I find Bonhoeffer's ideas heart-breaking and exhilarating. Heart-breaking because the tantalising incompleteness of his thought brings home the brutal shortness of his life. And exhilarating because despite not sharing his Christian starting-point, I can share the conclusion to which I think he was pointing: that the crude oppositions of transcendence to immanence, and religion to secularism, can all too easily imprison our thinking; and that in the end, the true source of human meaning lies in our concern for each other.

Martin Spence used to be a full time trade union negotiator. His book *The Making of a London Suburb: Capital Comes to Penge* was published by Merlin Press (Monmouth) in 2007.

He see the Water Snakes

from

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water snakes;
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire;
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free;
The Albatross fell off and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge