

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE ETHICS OF PARTICIPATION¹

Sixty years ago—on July 21, 1944—Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following paragraph from his cell in the Tegel prison in Berlin to his former student and friend, Eberhart Bethge:

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a [human being] and a Christian.

I quoted this paragraph at the end of my discussion of Bonhoeffer in my book *Remembered Voices*; and then I brought that discussion to an end with the thought from which, today, I should like to begin this seminar:

It is this *worldly discipleship* of Jesus Christ that constitutes the final, mature statement of the thirty-nine-year-old martyr about the meaning of what Luther named *theologia crucis*. To be a disciple of the crucified one, to receive from the Spirit of the risen Christ the courage of Jesus' kind of suffering love, is not to walk away from this world in search of a better, but precisely the opposite—to proceed more and more steadfastly into the very heart of the *civitas terrena*, like the fleeing Peter redirected to burning Rome by the One he met on the Appian Way. Worldly discipleship: These words of Bonhoeffer must not be forgotten; this discipleship can never be sufficiently learned; this legacy remains largely unclaimed by our floundering churches.

The thesis I want to develop here is already implicit in that comment but I shall restate it in a slightly different way simply for the purposes of clarity. **It is necessary to see Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a 20th Century exemplar of what Luther called the**

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theology of the cross. This theological posture, which is still scarcely understood in the anglosaxon world, is what unites Bonhoeffer's earlier and later writings. What is unique in his articulation of this theological tradition is the manner in which, overagainst the pietistic distortions of the *theologia crucis*, he carried its premises concretely into the context of worldly existence, exemplifying for us the participatory ethical consequences of this minority theological approach.

There will be four sections in this brief presentation. They follow the ordering of thought in that statement.

1.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AS THE LINK

One of the perennial questions associated with Bonhoeffer's work concerns what appears to many to be a discrepancy, or at least a significant hiatus, between his earlier and his later works. In the earlier writings—works like *Creation and Fall*, *Life Together*, and (especially) *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937, Munich)—Bonhoeffer seems to many of his readers an interesting yet by no means ground-breaking exponent of European Lutheran piety. These writings interested people largely on account of the life-story that was their background, ending with Bonhoeffer's execution at the hands of the Nazis just one month prior to their total capitulation. To be sure, with the publication of his *Ethics* (Munich, 1949; English 1955) one saw an academic side of the young scholar that the earlier works didn't manifest. But by the time Bonhoeffer's last surviving writings, under the title *Letters and Papers From Prison*, had been digested by a significant number of thinkers, many began to feel that the later Bonhoeffer differed significantly from the earlier. Some were pleased about that, others disappointed. Eberhart Bethge,

who became the editor of Bonhoeffer's works, reports that Karl Barth was definitely among the latter. Barth did not dismiss the fragments of the *Letters* that have become most famous, but he cautioned against taking them too seriously. Perhaps, he said, "the lonely prisoner might possibly have 'peeped around some corner' and seen something that was true, but . . . it [is] too 'enigmatic' and . . . it [is] better to stick to the early Bonhoeffer."²

On the other side, many (including members of the so-called death-of-God school) took hold of ideas like "religionless Christianity" and "world come of age" as confirmation of Bonhoeffer's repudiation of his earlier, rather Barthian emphases, and an endorsement of their own radical secularity; and this approach was also indirectly confirmed by Bishop Robinson's best-selling book, *Honest to God*, first published in 1963, in which the Bonhoeffer of the late fragments played a highly significant role.

It is my belief that neither of these reactions is appropriate. Clearly, the thoughts expressed in Bonhoeffer's letters from the Tegel prison and especially from April of 1944 onwards, contain very serious if fragmentary ideas, and should not be shrugged off as 'peeping around some corner.' At the same time, while Bonhoeffer made an occasional, mildly critical reference to his own earlier work, it is extravagant and superficial to see his last thoughts as if they were entirely discontinuous with what went before. So I find myself in agreement with those (including both Bethge and W.A. Visser t'Hooft) who say that while there are new emphases and a conspicuous deepening in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's last writings, the essential thread of thought already present in his earliest writings has been carried through to the end. Indeed, I think that the late Bonhoeffer has

² *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. by Eric Mosbacher *et al.*; New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970; p.792.

taken to its logical conclusion (though it is a conclusion too many have avoided) the theological premises with which the young theologian was enthralled from the outset. There are not two Bonhoeffers, only one. The story of his life parallels the progress of his thought; both life and thought involve an ever-deepening descent into the meaning of gospel for a world that is no longer Christian or even “religious.”

2

WHAT IS THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS?

How can we characterize the core of Bonhoeffer’s spirituality? What is the “essential thread” that runs through the complex tapestry of his life and work? It is without doubt, I believe, a 20th Century expression of the theological posture, method and spirit that Martin Luther named *theologia crucis*, theology of the cross.

But long experience has taught me that this term cannot be used without further explanation—and especially in our English-speaking theological and religious circles. As Ernst Kaesemann said a few years ago, in the English-speaking world, if it is heard at all, the term “theology of the cross” is usually taken as a synonym for the doctrine of atonement. This is part of a larger problem, namely, the general unfamiliarity with the Lutheran side of the Reformation in English-speaking cultures. (I argued in a recent article for THE LUTHERAN (the official magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), that Luther himself is, of all the major reformers, the least understood in anglosaxon Christianity (indeed, a recent poll reveals that 78% of Americans don’t know who Luther was).

Of all Luther’s puzzling and paradoxical ideas, the theology of the cross is the most foreign to the kind of Christianity that has shaped our White Anglo-Saxon

Protestant society, whether it be that of Calvin or Wesley or the 19th Century Evangelicals.

To be honest, I rather despair of trying to say anything definitive about the theology of the cross in the short time that I have for this presentation; but I shall have to attempt it all the same because, after more than half a century of living with Bonhoeffer, I have had to conclude that it's impossible to understand him apart from his spiritual and intellectual formation by this theological tradition. So let me offer seven terse observations about the theology of the cross as background for the rest of this discussion.

1. The term *theologia crucis* is Luther's. He certainly didn't invent the idea, but he did invent the terminology—and very. . . . inventively. He first used it in 1518 in the Heidelberg Disputation when he was required by the Vicar General of his Augustinian order to explain himself after the furor he created over his 95 Theses. The theology of the cross, Luther says, looks for the invisible things of God hidden beneath their opposite: God's *glory* is indeed revealed in Jesus the Christ, but it is revealed as something completely antithetical to our preconceptions of divinity and of glory. The revealed God is thus the hidden God.
2. Luther is committed to the christological centre of the gospel as testified to by scripture; but he is also committed to an honest realism about the world—a realism that refuses to lie about reality in the service of the triumphant religion. “The theology of the cross”, he said, “calls the thing what it is.” Luther presented this theology both as a *critical* and a *constructive theology*. It is critical chiefly of what Luther called *theologia gloriae* (theology of

glory), which he understood to be the dominant theology of Christendom, and which we could call religious triumphalism. The imperial church requires an imperial theology, the glorious church requires a glorious theology. This glorious theology necessarily distorts the gospel by turning the crucified Christ, who is inglorious by all worldly standards, into a figure of power and grandeur, and thus effectively removes him from the sphere of real life.

3. The *locus classicus* of the theology of the cross in the Newer Testament is found in the first two chapters of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "We preached Christ crucified. . . ."—the text that prompted Luther to write, *crux sola nostra theologia* (The cross alone is our theology). But the Professor Luther who introduced term 'theology of the cross' was also teaching the Psalms, and we must recognize as the greater background of this theological tradition the whole prophetic tradition of Hebraic faith, the essence of which (as Abraham Heschel demonstrated in his book, *The Prophets*) is the prophetic consciousness of the "divine pathos", i.e. the suffering of God, who suffers on account of the creatures' suffering. Between the "divine pathos" of the prophets and the *passio Christi* of the apostolic witness, there is a direct line of continuity. So this theology unites the testimony of Israel and the Church in a way that ecclesiastical triumphalism has never done. Christian triumphalism has in fact been the theological backbone of Christendom's supercessionist approach to Judaism.

5. Quite unlike Anselmic or Calvinistic atonement theology, Luther's theology of the cross does not see the cross of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice on the part of the one good man who in this way placates a wrathful God, but rather in Christ's passion it sees God suffering in solidarity with alienated humanity. The sacrificial movement here is not Humanity towards God but God towards Humanity. Grace is "costly." This is very important for understanding the direction of Bonhoeffer's whole theology and ethic.
6. Far from being a statement about the cross of Jesus in any exclusive way, however, the theology of the cross refers to a whole spirit and method of theology. As Juergen Moltmann put it in his book *The Crucified God*, one of the most important recent books for this tradition, the theology of the cross is not about any particular part of theology; it is rather "the key signature" in which the whole of Christian theology is written.
7. In terms of method, this theology relies heavily on a dialectical approach, as for instance one has it in Nicholas of Cusa or Peter Abailard. That is, it involves a constant interplay between the positive and the negative, the Yes and the No, thesis and antithesis. As in Kierkegaard's rendition of this tradition especially, there is for Luther (nor Bonhoeffer) no Hegelian synthesis: the dialogue continues; theology does not end; there is no completed work. As I have sometimes put it, with Christian theology you have to keep talking or else somebody will believe your last sentence. Last sentences always require further sentences to prevent their misappropriation. Because what one is trying to describe, in theological work, is not a What, not

an object, but a living Subject, and our statements about this subject are doomed to be wrong. All they can do is point to a living Word that defies containment. And this is also a point of connection between Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth—though Barth, in Bonhoeffer’s later view, did not abide by this insight but produced a whole system in which everything is accounted for. In particular, the negative has a very important role in this theology—as we see from Luther’s nomenclature itself. The theology of the cross has constantly to guard against the tendency of all theology, indeed all thought, to become idolatrous and triumphalist. This is why Bonhoeffer is critical of most resurrection theology; because the resurrection turns out, in the hands of the imperial church and in imperial cultures to mean the supercession of the cross and the substitution of “heaven” for a salvation that is directed towards this world..

8. Finally, if I were asked to characterize this theological tradition as to its content, as distinct from its method and spirit, I would say that its most salient feature is its insistence precisely upon the world-directedness of the Christian message. It is really about God’s abiding commitment to this world. God is as committed to the life of this world as that cross is stuck in the earth, and precisely in the place of the skull—symbolically, the place where death is apparently victorious. In other terms, the theology of the cross is the ultimate *incarnational* theology; for it spells out the divine identification with and love for the creation in terms not only of God’s solidarity with us in life but in a life whose inherent terminus is death. It is only from that perspective that this

theology also allows itself to become a theology of resurrection. Bonhoeffer would have agreed with Kaesemann that the resurrection is “a chapter in the theology of the cross.”³

3.

BONHOEFFER’S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

From his earliest days as an intentional Christian in a religiously neutral, upper-middleclass, intellectually-sophisticated family, the church—or what (under Bonhoeffer’s tutelage) I call ‘the disciple community’—was Bonhoeffer’s particular theme. But also from the outset he was exceptionally conscious of the temptation of the church to confuse faith with religion. Strengthened by Barth’s critique of religion as “unbelief”⁴, Bonhoeffer constantly called his fellow-Christians away from religion and the defence of religion to the serious discipleship of Jesus Christ. As Visser ‘t Hooft writes, Bonhoeffer

³ In a letter to Bethge written on June 9, 1944, Bonhoeffer reflected on the differences between what he called the “redemption myths” of many religions and the idea of redemption in the Old Testament. The latter, he said, is “*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. The redemption myths try unhistorically to find an eternity after death.”

Then he goes on to speak of “the hope of resurrection” in Christianity, which, he insists, is distorted when it is understood as redemption in the non-Hebraic sense of escaping from the “cares, distress, fears, and longings [of this world]—from sin and death, [to] a better world beyond the grave:”

“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 which is even more sharply defined than that it is in the Old Testament. The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself (‘My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?’), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one. Redemption myths arise from human boundary-experiences, but Christ takes hold of a man at the centre of his life.” (*Letters and Papers*, pp. 336-337)

⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 2, trans. by G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956; pp. 297-325.

insisted that “the church must stop defending itself and its particular ‘religiosity’ and simply be present in the world for others, as Jesus Christ was.”⁵

This kind of distinction between Christian faith and religion (religion as temptation, as the impulse to control) is already of the essence of the theology of the cross in its consciousness of the dangers of religious triumphalism and power-seeking. It is, so to speak, the critical side of the *theologia crucis*; and as such it informs all of Bonhoeffer’s earlier writings, especially *The Cost of Discipleship*. What the fragments from the final *Letters* indicate, is that to this critical dimension Bonhoeffer’s later experience led him to contemplate more fully the *constructive* side of this theological tradition, which is bound up with its radical world-commitment [my 8th observation, above]. In other words, this theology not only warns Christians against trying to achieve mastery in the world but it fosters in them an ever-greater sense of worldly solidarity and service—indeed, suffering servanthood. The gospel of the cross leads all who are touched by it more fully and defencelessly into the heart of the world, and without concealed religious motivation.

Let us recognize, says the imprisoned Bonhoeffer of the fragments, that the world in which we find ourselves now is no longer the “religious” world upon which the entire *corpus Christianum* has depended heretofore. Rather, it is a world “come of age”. Much of course hangs on what Bonhoeffer intended this key term (‘come of age’) to mean. Was he being ironic? —even perhaps sarcastic? Did he have in mind a pseudo-sophisticated world that (in the terms of Voltaire) found the “hypothesis” of God unnecessary, and did he (with many a preacher) want to mock this kind of secular

⁵ Foreword, J. Martin Bailey and Douglas Gilbert, *The Steps of Bonhoeffer: A Pictorial Album*, Philadelphia/Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1969, p. 10.

bravado? I think not, nor does Bethge. Rather, he was using the term ‘come of age’ in a positive sense, meaning that the world had indeed achieved a certain maturity. Behind this idea, Bethge insists, lies Kant’s conception of the *Aufklaerung*, the Enlightenment: “The Enlightenment is the emergence of [humankind] from [the] immaturity that [humans themselves are] responsible for. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one’s own intelligence without the guidance of another person.” Bonhoeffer, says Bethge, did not scorn this declaration, as so many religious people have done, but rather he “welcomed the evolution of secularization” as the humankind’s recognition that it must now take responsibility for its own future and not presume that God would do it all for us. The glorious God, the God of power and might, runs the whole show. But the God who is revealed in the crucified one—the God already central to Jewish faith--makes room for serious human stewardship. In short, Bethge says, “Bonhoeffer now takes Kant’s irrevocable description of maturity as an essential element of his *theologia crucis*.”

Because Bonhoeffer never ceases to think dialectically, what he says about the world’s coming of age has two levels and there can be no positivistic leveling out. The Gospel of the *theologia crucis* has room for the world come of age and even accepts that such a world may deny the Gospel, but the acceptance includes assisting it at the same time to become truly itself. The unity and paradox of the *theologia crucis* and the world come of age found its most succinct expression in the passage he wrote on 16th of July, 1944, which has become famous:

“. . . that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*. And this is just what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as [people] who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world onto the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.

Given this chance of exploring in both directions the knowledge of the theology of the cross and the knowledge of the world’s having come of age, Bonhoeffer is even able to venture to state the contrary proposition, namely that the knowledge of the world’s coming of age can help us to a better understanding of the Gospel:

To that extent we may say that the development towards the world's coming of age. . . , which has done away with a false conception of God, opens up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness.

Or, putting it in an even more daring way: 'The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age.'⁶

Let me try to state all this in other words: God, for Christians, is not identical with the gods of religion, including the Christian religion. As Buber put it, God is more than merely 'God.' Tillich, similarly, spoke of "the God beyond God". But throughout history until the period of late Modernity, Christianity has sought its place in the world by assuming that its God is the true God after whom religion thirsts. Yet the God revealed in the crucified Christ is not only transcendent of this God of religion, but entirely different—different especially in God's complete lack of interest in competing with other religions or in competing with the world itself for preeminence. The God revealed in the cross of Christ is wholly devoted to the future of the world itself, to the fulfilment of the creation. Therefore, so long as people went looking for God beyond the world, in transcendent and glorious Otherness, God could not get through to those most apparently devoted to God, the religious. The 'coming of age' of the world, to the extent that it is realized, means the growing realization that the world itself—and not some unworldly Deity, and not some transworldly Heaven—is the proper sphere of human attention and care. In this way, the loss of what Bonhoeffer calls "the religious apriori"—i.e. the loss of the notion that humans are by nature 'religious' (*homo religiosus*)-- is a positive gain for faith. Instead of pursuing a God who carries us off to some ecstatic supranatural sphere, discipleship means pursuing the God who penetrates more and more deeply into

⁶ Bethge, *op.cit.*, p. 772.

the life of the world. And that God is found, not in the places where religion traditionally has looked for God, but in the places where God seems absent: that is, among the abandoned, the abused, the suffering, the marginalized.

4.

THE ETHIC OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Now if we have been following this theo-logic we shall have been led through a world-oriented theology of the cross to an ethic of the cross. And the essence of this ethic is its participatory character. Bonhoeffer, whose life itself was a gradual but irrevocable progression from the kind of detachment that an economically secure student of theology can know to a greater and ever greater involvement in the life of the world, in his case, a world in terrifying turmoil and danger. One of his poems is entitled ‘*Stations on the Road to Freedom,*’ and it details precisely his own descent into the hell of his own worldly context. His theology of the cross could not remain (in that ‘academic’ sense in which we usually use this word) a ‘theology’; it had to become an ethic of the cross. As Larry Rasmussen remarks at the end of his book on Bonhoeffer, “Luther’s initial impulse remains the suggestive one, namely, the theology of the cross. Bonhoeffer’s contribution is to envision and embody a community of the cross with an ethic of imitation, or participation, as the church’s societal vocation and presence.”⁷

Paul Lehman, Bonhoeffer’s closest American friend, captured something of what I think Bonhoeffer intended as his ethic of participation. In his book, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, Lehman asserts that the task of Christian ethics is to follow the Christ into the world. Jesus Christ, he says, “is at work in the world to make and to keep human

⁷ With Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer—His Significance for North Americans*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990; p. 173.

life human”, and the task of the Christian community, the community of discipleship, is to ask, “Where is the Christ now at work in the world?”, and to go there and seek to work with the One who is already active in that context.

This approach, I say, captures something of Bonhoeffer’s meaning; but I believe that Bonhoeffer’s ethical teaching is more radical than Lehman’s. For Bonhoeffer, the great clue to the ‘whereabouts’ of Christ in the world, so to speak, is worldly suffering. The defining mark of God for Bonhoeffer is God’s suffering—God’s voluntary suffering, suffering born not of necessity but of love for the suffering creation. This is why Luther dared to call God (not just Christ, but God!) *der gekreuzigte Gott*. As Visser ‘t Hooft puts it, “The challenge [of Bonhoeffer] means that we must understand the incarnation really radically. Christ did not bear the sins of Christians; he bore the sins of the world. The church must therefore live and suffer in the world, with the world, and for the world.”⁸

Thus Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, as Bethge writes, “seems entirely absorbed within the *theologia crucis*. . . . For him everything depends on the *theologia crucis*, but the only form in which he knows this is in its urging us towards the concrete fellowship with those who share Christ’s sufferings in the world.”⁹

In a manner very similar to that of Simone Weil, Bonhoeffer assumes that the Christian community can only learn what it may have to bring to the world’s healing by first participating in the suffering that is actually present. The disciple community has in some real sense to know itself bereft of solutions, empty-handed in the face of real agony. It will only discern the meaning of gospel, and of love of God and neighbour, as it allows

⁸ Op.cit., p. 11.

⁹ Op.cit., p. 791.

itself to descend into the darkness of human experience, and to do so without the cheap grace of easy religious answers.

It may help our comprehension of what is involved here if we lift this discussion, finally, out of the context of Hitler's Europe and consider what it would mean in our global context today. What would the theology of the cross, in the form of an ethic of participation, mean in the realm of contemporary social ethics?

I think we would be able to discover a great deal about this ethic if at this point, for instance, we were to have the time to stop and listen for several hours to the testimony of General Romeo Delaire as he recounts the devastating personal consequences of his experiences in Rwanda, or of Stephen Lewis as he relates the frustrations and limited successes of his attempts to interest Western peoples in the plight of sub-Saharan African peoples under the scourge of AIDS, or of those who are trying to make the affluent North more conscious of the poverty of the hemispheric south—for example, the ghastly reality of starvation in Ethiopia. The ethic of the cross, which was the final stage of Bonhoeffer's lifelong preoccupation with this neglected theological tradition, drives towards solidarity with those who suffer; and the ethic that emerges from this participatory involvement, while it may certainly be informed by the great traditions of biblical and traditional law, will be informed in a primary way by the actual conditions of the sufferers.

Perhaps it is easier to grasp what is involved here if we move from social to personal ethics. Any number of problems could be considered in this case, but in my book [The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World](#), I illustrated the meaning of participatory ethics by referring to the question of the church's attitude towards

homosexuality—obviously a very ‘hot’ topic. The usual approach to this question, particularly (but not exclusively) on the part of the more conservative element in the churches, is to assume that the Christian scriptures and tradition already have an explanation of this kind of human behaviour, and all the necessary counsel for those for whom it is an existential reality. This is, in other words, a triumphalistic ethic: an ethic borne of the theology of glory.

Armed with this kind of moral assumption, conservative Christians considering the matter of the ordination of gay and lesbian persons produce biblical and other arguments that in their belief strictly forbid the inclusion of such persons in ministry—and perhaps in the church at large. Liberal Christians, on the other hand, find other aspects of the tradition on whose basis they can endorse gay ordination. I would make no secret of the fact that I am on the side of the liberals in this; but neither group is pursuing participatory ethics in the Bonhoeffer sense. Both are approaching the question theoretically, i.e. from a posture of detached and principled theory. Jesus did not evolve an understanding of the place of women in the community of faith by studying the relevant texts—though he certainly knew the texts! Rather he entered into dialogue with specific women, including ritually excluded women, and left for his followers a way of considering the whole question of the relation of the sexes that is in a real sense “new”, though it has certain antecedents in the literature of the Old Testament.

Similarly, the ethics of participation require a prior in-depth engagement with persons and groups whose sexual orientation differs from the behaviour of the statistical majority. New and highly pertinent factors have entered the scene of which the scriptures and the most regnant traditions of Christendom know little or nothing—in particular the

entire concept of sexual *orientation*, as distinct from sexual behaviour. Until Christians know something of what it means to live as one psychically and perhaps biologically oriented towards one's own sex, and to live under the specific conditions of society here and now (a society, in our case, pervaded by fear of AIDS and the stigmatization associated with that epidemic), they are surely in no position to make concrete decisions that will affect the fate of those concerned.

“The first requirement of the ethic of the cross. . . is that the disciple community must allow itself to be led as deeply as possible into the sphere of the question. The question—that is, any matter deserving serious moral deliberation, decision, and action,—is never a merely general one, for example, ‘The Human Relation to Nature’, or ‘Human Sexuality.’ It is always specific, for the historical conditions under which it is asked are never incidental to its reality. It is precisely the complex contextual specificity of the question that makes it a real and not merely a theoretical question.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Let me in conclusion simply restate my thesis (I think that I have commented on each part of it, and I hope that you will hear it, therefore, in a little more integrated manner now:

It is necessary to see Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a 20th Century exemplar of what Martin Luther called ‘the theology of the cross.’ This theological posture, which is still scarcely understood in the anglosaxon world, is what unites Bonhoeffer's earlier and later writings. What is unique in his articulation of this theological tradition is the manner in which, overagainst pietistic distortions of the theology of the cross, he carried its premises concretely into the context of worldly existence, thus exemplifying for us the participatory ethical consequences of this neglected minority tradition of our Christian heritage.

¹⁰ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus in a Suffering World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003; p 201