

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Fiction from Tegel Prison 1943-45: His Reflections on the Dark Side of Cultural Protestantism in Nazi Germany.

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Part One

Born as fourth son into the family of a highly distinguished professor of medicine on February 4th, 1906 in Breslau, Dietrich Bonhoeffer received the educational formation of a *Bildungsbürger* the aristocrats of culture and learning; a phenomenon peculiar to the German upper bourgeoisie of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was at a time when Germany was simultaneously both a respected and feared world power.¹ In his short life – he was executed by the Nazis for high treason April, ninth, 1945 – Bonhoeffer accumulated a breathtaking list of accomplishments. He became a doctor of theology when he was only twenty-one, in 1927, and completed his postdoctoral qualification, the *Habilitation*, in 1930. This qualified him for a university lectureship in Berlin. Just prior to that, he had been awarded a scholarship to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York where he had a number of crucial new experiences that challenged his value system and theological position. There, he also became sympathetic to the Negro struggle for complete emancipation and as a result developed an admiration for black spirituality. Bonhoeffer also befriended fellow foreign students, one Swiss, Erwin Sutz, and one French, Jean Lasserre, who were instrumental in getting Bonhoeffer to revise key theological questions, chief of which was the idea that the Sermon on the Mount was meant for practical application in the present and not to be understood eschatologically. In short, in some crucial respects, Bonhoeffer parted intellectual company with his famous German mentors who had taught that God worked out his purpose for Creation through the politics of Great Powers. Instead, Bonhoeffer became a champion of international reconciliation and an

¹ John A. Moses, 'Bonhoeffer's Germany: the Political Context' in John W. de Gruchy (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, (Cambridge, 1999) pp1-21.

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ardent ecumenist. In fact he worked intensively from 1932 onwards to mobilize the then ecumenical movement to become a forum for world peace. He saw, along with his brothers and brothers-in-law, that a Nazi electoral victory in Germany would inevitably mean a second world war.¹

The nightmare that Bonhoeffer feared became reality on 30 January 1933 with Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor. From that moment on Bonhoeffer became an agitator against the regime, protesting firstly against the *Führer* principle as irreconcilable with Christianity, then against the Jewish policy of the regime, and finally against its church policy. All three issues were, of course, linked. Hitler had demanded the submission of the individual conscience to himself personally; he demanded and achieved the exclusion of Jews from the German racial community and made hatred of them official policy, and thirdly Hitler demanded a church that not only accepted these policies but one that should preach them as consonant with the Gospel. And, of course, there was a large section of the Protestant church eager to comply with these demands, believing that Hitler was a re-incarnated saviour called to deliver the nation from the shackles of the Treaty of Versailles and lead Germany to imperial greatness once more.² That this was all irreconcilable with true Christianity was also clear to a number of other leading German Protestants. They were led to form a separate church called the *Confessing Church* determined to uphold traditional Lutheranism against the heresies of the official pro-Nazi Reich Church. Bonhoeffer was a leader in this oppositional movement, and when the Nazis in April 1933 introduced the so-called Aryan paragraph into an amended law governing appointments to the public service that excluded citizens of Jewish descent, Bonhoeffer was outraged. This outrage was intensified when the Synod of the Old Prussian Union applied the Aryan paragraph to pastors who were baptised Jews.³

¹ The salient facts about Bonhoeffer's career are contained in the definitive biography by Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, (London, 1970).

² The standard work in English on the so-called German Christians who promoted these views is by Doris L. Bergin, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (North Carolina, 1996).

³ Bethge, *op cit*, p237.

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This led Bonhoeffer to declare a *status confessionis*, meaning that the church was confronted by a fundamental theological error that demanded immediate redress. In this case the church was being instructed by the State who it may or may not baptise, and here the New Testament was unequivocal that no one could be excluded from the fellowship of the church. If a church enforced this exclusionist measure it ceased being the church of Jesus Christ and thus there was but one course of action, namely to walk out and form a new church that did conform to the Gospel. That was essentially the background to the formation of the *Confessing Church* which then competed with the State-sponsored Reich Church with its commitment to the *Führer* principle.

As well as all this, Bonhoeffer began to reflect on the origins of Christian anti-Semitism and realised that virtually the entire church was affected by a so-called *Theologia Gloriam* that condemned the Jews to exclusion from God's grace until they submitted to baptism. Having refused to acknowledge the crucified Christ as Messiah, the Old Covenant from Sinai was extinguished by the New Covenant sealed on Calvary. The Jews had deserted God and were thus condemned to wander the earth in a state of tribal dissolution, homeless and persecuted. And indeed, what was happening to the Jews under the Nazis was completely understandable to the overwhelming majority of Germans. Bonhoeffer, however, took an opposite view.

Already in April 1933, in his address, 'The Church and the Jewish Question' Bonhoeffer demanded that the church take the part of all persecuted Jews, baptised or not. His theology was driven by the passage in Proverbs that demands one should 'Open thy mouth for the dumb', and also in particular by St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, (chapter 9), that makes the unequivocal point that the church rests on a Jewish foundation and cannot be separated from it and remain the church. In a word, the Old Covenant had *not* been abrogated on Calvary. Indeed, Bonhoeffer came to make this theology of German Jewish relations the yardstick by which to determine whether the Church was still the true Church.¹ Later, when he became aware of the deportation of Jews to the East, Bonhoeffer wrote that to drive the

¹ See, 'The Church and the Jewish Question' in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes from Bonhoeffer's Collected Works*, Vol. I, (London, 1974) p225.

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Jews out of Europe was to drive Christ out of Europe since Jesus Christ was a Jew. He then declared his Church guilty of tacitly condoning horrendous offences against the most helpless and defenceless of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ: *all* Jews whether baptised or not, there could be no such thing as an ethnically cleansed Church.¹

Obviously, not all of Bonhoeffer's co-religionists shared these views; they remained largely prisoners of the age old *Theologia Gloriam*. What appalled Bonhoeffer most, apart from the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews by the regime, was its demand that all Germans hate Jews as official policy. He came to see that mere agitation was insufficient; one had to eliminate the chief cause of hate, namely, the *Führer* himself. So Bonhoeffer had to decide to switch from being an ineffectual agitator to becoming a revolutionary. This happened in mid-1939 when he joined the conspiracy led by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris of the *Abwehr* (Counterintelligence) as, according to his official designation, a courier. Bonhoeffer used this posting to assist Jews to emigrate, and it was in connection with this activity that the Gestapo began to investigate Bonhoeffer and finally arrested him in April 1943. His execution took place almost exactly two years later.

It was during this time of incarceration that Bonhoeffer began to reflect and write both theology and literature that included poetry, a novel and short stories. He had already published his doctorate, a standard requirement of German universities, and also his *Habilitation*, both of which were highly technical studies in Christology. But after 1933 Bonhoeffer began to ponder why such a highly educated and cultivated, not to mention Christian people could, as he wrote to his Swiss friend at that time, lose both their heads and their Bibles.² This question especially concerned the support given to Hitler by the upper middle class, i.e. the *Bildungsbürgertum*, Bonhoeffer's own class, and the *Besitzbürgertum*, the landed and propertied classes, as well as big business. There was something missing in their value system.

How was it possible that such people could stand idly by and tacitly witness the collapse of order, the triumph of caprice and the violation

¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* Vol. 6, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, (Gutersloh, 1992) p130.

² Bonhoeffer to Erwin Sutz, 14 April, 1933 in: Vol. XII, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, (Gutersloh, 1997) p58.

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of human rights that was taking place? At first Bonhoeffer thought to investigate this theologically, in a work entitled, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1936). He argued that Germans had been living off cheap grace. This had deadened their senses to the suffering of others. They needed to re-appraise the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount from which *Kulturprotestantismus* had become alienated. True discipleship demanded service to others, awareness of duty and preparedness to suffer in the cause of justice.

It was doubtless in this spirit that Bonhoeffer endured his humiliating arrest and incarceration that must have been a dual strain as he had only just previously become engaged. If he had not been able to write and have his letters, sermons, poems, theological reflections, as well as his other literary work, smuggled out by a friendly guard, his life would have been intolerable.

Part Two

Suffice it to say that everything Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, including his love letters,¹ had to do with the spiritual re-newal of his class. He was appalled by the fact that the *Bildungsbürgertum* had 'lost their heads and lost their Bibles', and allowed the most educated, creative and cultivated people in the world to be seduced into the service of the Anti-Christ. His class needed to recognize this and do penance in order to recover their role as the spiritual and intellectual leaders of the nation. Consequently, his works including the play, the novel and the short story, are strongly didactic. Each of these requires a brief investigation, but before proceeding, we need to outline Bonhoeffer's ideal image of the life-style of the *Bildungsbürgertum*.

First, this phenomenon is a product of the Lutheran Reformation and the spirituality and culture that it spawned. When Luther translated the Bible into German he wrought a world-historical achievement of immeasurable proportions. The Word of God became the property of the people and it induced a revolutionary new piety. The former emphasis on 'good works' was transferred to cultivating inner

¹ See, *Brautbriefe Zelle 92, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Maria von Wedemeyer 1943-1945*, (Munich, 1997).

spirituality, and whereas previously worship was a concentrated corporate act (namely, attendance at Mass), now the corporate dimension was found in fulfilling one's vocation, whatever it might be, because everyone, from housewives to artisans, to public officials, to soldiers, princes and kings, all contributed to God's economy, and this was service to God, *Gottesdienst*. In a word, the whole of life was an expression of the divine love for Creation. The role of the church in this new dispensation was to preach the Gospel and inculcate inner piety, to sensitise the individual soul with the love of God, to arouse a more profound sense of duty and service to society and to make the individual aware of his or her role in the hierarchy of service within the State that was, especially since Luther, seen as a divinely instituted 'order of preservation'.

With this re-orientation in the life of the Christian person that enabled Christian piety to be expressed in innumerable ways, even by being busy at work, the more sensitive soul could seek spiritual nourishment in the new Lutheran hymnody that stressed the universal availability of God's saving grace through Calvary. And then there arose that unique German cultural phenomenon of Protestant church music of which J.S. Bach is the supreme example.

The ideal piety of the *Bildungsbürger* was characterised, then, by service to the State, and thereby the community, simply by conscientious execution of one's duty, fortified by regular Bible reading, and the observance of Sunday worship, and other occasions in the Christian calendar, especially Christmas and Easter, and the regular Protestant holidays, whereby spiritual edification could be derived simply from attendance at a performance of one of Bach's oratorios or passions whether in Church or not. It all formed an organic cultural whole. Indeed, the entirety of life was meant to be saturated by the spirit of the Gospel of Christ. In Lutheranism, there is a mystical merging of the secular and spiritual realms.

This was the spiritual foundation upon which Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood. He regretted that many of his class, indeed Germans of all classes, did not seek the spiritual riches offered by it. On the other hand, he could rejoice that it had rubbed off on many contemporaries who could not be described as openly religious. They evinced a caring attitude to fellow human beings and in doing so were unconsciously

Christian. In short, the practice of decency was attributable to the Christian foundations of society. The role now of Christians of all classes, but particularly of the upper middle class, because of their education and leading social status, was to set the example.

The macabre success of Hitler in capturing the hearts and minds of many Germans of all classes was attributed by Bonhoeffer largely to the failure of his own class to sustain the values they had inherited.

Part Three

Turning now to the surviving texts of Tegel fiction in sequence, we investigate first the fragment entitled simply *Drama*.¹ This involves a military doctor who is treating wounded soldiers. One of these is his own twenty-five year old son who has less than a year to live. *Drama* is essentially a meditation on dying with dignity, a subject that so obviously preoccupied the imprisoned Bonhoeffer. Such concerns, 'The last things,' could only be met only by individuals of faith. But faith is not restricted to the *Bildungsbürgertum*, although they enjoy every advantage to have it in abundance. Essentially, faith is a universal phenomenon that even the most socially disadvantaged can evince; snobbery is not Christian. Of course, *Drama* is a statement of several layers and is the most mystical of the fragments of Tegel fiction. On the level of social criticism, however, Bonhoeffer attacks an ugly phenomenon, namely, the lack of compassion for the wounded veterans displayed in public by hooligan elements who insulted crippled soldiers on the street. For Bonhoeffer, this is a particularly poignant sign of cultural and moral decay that is clearly attributable to the neglect of Christian values.

This theme is again taken up fiercely by Bonhoeffer in the short story about the horribly disfigured Lance Corporal Berg, entitled *Story*. Here, Bonhoeffer graphically illustrates the contrast and conflict between decency and evil that characterised the Third Reich. The scene is a prison for deserters. One in chains is dragged in to the commandant's office. He is eighteen years old, has already been

¹ I have chosen to work here from the official English translation: Clifford Greene (ed), *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, Vol. 7, Fortress Press (Minneapolis 1999).

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awarded an Iron Cross for bravery at the front, but is found disorientated and exhausted in the snow miles behind the lines, where he confesses to desertion. The commandant, a senior NCO, abuses him mercilessly and he is ignominiously thrown into a cell to await almost certain execution.

In the meantime, the commandant is portrayed in conversation with a junior NCO, his adjutant, who should by rights also be at the front but claims he has a heart condition and should remain at his desk job. Because he is able to supply the commandant regularly with black market butter, his story regarding his heart condition is not pursued, thus he is able to keep his safe posting.

The commandant then receives a phone call from headquarters to expect a new guard, retired from front duties because of wounds, and he is requested to treat this guard with special consideration. This of course, turns out to be Lance Corporal Berg whose face has been literally burnt off and who has been patched up grotesquely. Berg settles down to duties and is most solicitous of the welfare and treatment of the inmates, demanding better food than the swill they are usually served. He even recommends leniency in their treatment. Berg, is in short, a decent man. Consequently, he is an embarrassment to the Commandant on two counts; firstly, he had dutifully served at the front and suffered horrendous disfiguring wounds to prove it; and secondly, in spite of this, but perhaps because of it, he has compassion for the deserters who are being unjustly victimised by the system at the hands of duplicitous scoundrels. Berg has to go.

Clearly, in *Story*, Bonhoeffer attacked the system of which he himself was a victim. The Third Reich is the product of the catastrophic decline of Christian values. This is not how it should be, and in *Novel*, we are presented with an explanation for the triumph of evil.

Significantly, the novel begins with a corrosive critique of the Church. The wife of the *burgomeister* of a small north German town, Frau Brake, leaves Church one Sunday morning extremely depressed about the sermon. She is overtaken by an acquaintance, a woman of similar age, but not possessing the same intellectual rigour as Frau Brake, who greets her and wants to talk about the sermon very positively. She could not recall the exact content but kept saying how

wonderfully the pastor had preached. Yet that was precisely the problem in Frau Brake's mind; the pastor had not preached the Gospel, not said anything relevant, critical or challenging, he simply told the congregation what he thought they wanted to hear. In short, it was an anti-sermon, but one had to be a sharp *Bildungsbürger* to recognise it as false Gospel.

Clearly, for Bonhoeffer, the widespread anti-intellectual, mindlessly nationalistic theological culture in Germany was an insidious evil, somewhat parallel to current fundamentalism, precisely because the pastors who were educated to read the signs of the times and give critical, intellectual leadership prostituted themselves, wittingly or unwittingly, in the service of the false God of nationalism. There had been, in short, a *trahison des clercs* that had contributed to the susceptibility of Germans to the demonic charisma of Adolf Hitler. Attention to the pure Gospel and the pure Reformation heritage would have immunised Christians against this. Unfortunately, the poor preaching had also alienated many otherwise well disposed people from the Church and so they fell prey to the general nationalistic hysteria.

The associated factor that Bonhoeffer identifies as betrayal was the failure of the *Bildungsbürgertum* generally to sustain values of decency in a way very similar to Friedrich Meinecke's analysis in his *The German Catastrophe* (1945). This comes out in Bonhoeffer's novel in an incident where the grown up children of the Brake family decide to go on a Sunday afternoon picnic at a small lake in nearby woods. Into the midst of their bucolic idyll bursts a bad tempered young forester in a kind of uniform wearing inappropriately striking yellow boots. He abuses the young people for trespassing, threatening them with physical violence. At the height of his tirade, the owner of the estate appears, a retired major, who upbraids the forester, a man of common background who was obviously enjoying intimidating the unintentional trespassers.

The major reveals himself to be a real gentleman who lectures the forester on good manners: one does not threaten or intimidate defenceless people who are only guilty of a simple mistake. The major and he demands that the forester apologise, but he steadfastly refuses to do, insisting that it would offend his sense of honour.

Bonhoeffer uses this incident essentially to make the point that those now in power have misunderstood what true authority is and how it should be exercised. This comes out in a speech by the major who spells it out in precisely these terms, however he blames his own class for setting a bad example. In short, the Nazis are an obscene caricature of what the major's class formerly was; a class whose own fault it was that the situation had degenerated to the extent that it had.

The novel develops dramatically when the identity of the Brake children is finally revealed to the major. It transpires that the major, who had left Germany after the Great War to farm in South Africa where he married an English woman, was a boyhood friend of Herr Brake, the father of the young people. It is interesting that the major had recognised them from the first as being of his own class, not the usual riff-raff from the town, and anxious to make amends for the rough treatment at the hands of Herr Gelbstiefel, ('Yellowboots'). The major immediately adopts a very friendly attitude to them as though they were virtually close relatives, and explains how he became their father's boyhood friend.

This is a penetrating insight into the mores of German boys' secondary schools prior to the First World War because it deals with an especially bitter power struggle or clash of egos between the existing class leader Brake, and a new comer, the future major, for the kudos of being the most feared and respected student both in the realm of the classroom and athletics.

What is remarkable for the Anglo-Saxon educated reader is the basic assumption, on the part of all boys, that there are permanent inequalities between and among the boys based on family background, and this is accepted as quite normal. Instead of a situation in which the point of departure was that all boys are socially equal, and all have a degree of ability to contribute to team effort accordingly, in the German *Gymnasium* it was expected that one from better family background would become spokesman for the class. He would clearly have to be superior and brighter and also stronger physically. And so, there was a competition between obvious candidates; each one having a constituency among the masses, so to speak.

This was certainly different from the Anglo-Saxon system in which prefects were nominated by the school staff on the basis of both

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sporting and class-room ability. Paradoxically, the German system was superficially more democratic, but it was also more barbaric, encouraging a great deal of factionalism and attendant intrigue among class members. The major recounts how as a new boy he arrived determined to come in at the top but realised that he would have to win the position away from the existing leader.

What I think Bonhoeffer is saying is that it was expected of a son of the *Bildungsbürgertum* at that time and particularly in that country town situation, to demonstrate his ability to lead and set the example. This was a social obligation, a case of *noblesse oblige*, in German: *Adel verpflichtet*. A contest arose when the incumbent class spokesman also perceived himself in the same way, and this is what Bonhoeffer describes in some detail between the future *Burgomeister* and army officer. There are two related outcomes: the rivals become firm friends, thus not only demonstrating the solidarity of their class, but also the supremacy of noble values; and, secondly, the pre-existent factionalism is overcome. The toadies who thrived on intrigue are marginalised and put in their place. In this way the situation is resolved.

One is struck, though, by the contrast to the Anglo-Saxon secondary school culture. The German *Gymnasium* was meant to be a microcosm of the nation. In it were concentrated the educated elite who fostered their peculiar devotion to learning, and cultivated ideas of superiority while above all acquiring the notion that in the fullness of time they would be leading the nation whether it be in the army, the Church, the public service, or either the university or *Gymnasium* teaching professions.

Where all this differed from Anglo-Saxon political culture in the same era is in the total unawareness of an instituted class struggle. Boys in British or Australian secondary boarding schools knew that there was an organised working class that had already succeeded in claiming its place in the sun and had thrown up able leaders to make that patently clear. The *Bildungsbürgertum* never really accepted that it would be one day the same in Germany, and there is strong evidence to suggest that Bonhoeffer came later to realise this.

In the concluding part of the novel, the Brake boys, after their visit to the major's estate, have the opportunity to reflect on what the major

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had told them and relate it all to Germany's present tragic circumstances. Their discussion is summed up in a speech by one Christoph Brake:

And who is responsible for this whole calamity?... None other than the classes that set the tone, the so-called upper class, whom everybody sees as a model for success in life. And this upper class is for the most part already a bunch of rotten, obsequious lackeys; they combine bootlicking towards those above and brutality towards those below, lots of rhetoric on the outside and decay on the inside. And a few decent individuals and families who could play a significant role withdraw into themselves because they're repulsed by this vacuous, conceited society.... That is where the problem lies. We need a genuine upper class again; but where are we going to find one?¹

Bonhoeffer has used the form of drama, short story and novel as vehicles for strong social-political criticism. He was a truly German patriot in the tradition of the *Bildungsbürgertum* and regretted immeasurably the inability of that class in the crisis to rise above it and lead the nation back to decency. But they had 'lost their heads and their Bibles'.

Finally, the Tegel fiction shows that Bonhoeffer was no democrat in the Anglo-Saxon sense with its Whiggish assumptions about equality and progress that left God right out of the equation. Was Germany, therefore, a more Christian country? If so, there was a downside to the Lutheran legacy, namely: a susceptibility to authoritarian structures that became corrupted because they were operated by mere men. It is very interesting to observe that although Lord Acton (1834-1902) who had made acute observations along these lines was half German on his mother's side. Germany never produced a similar liberal leader or political critic.² Perhaps Bonhoeffer was the

¹ *Fiction from Tegel Prison*, p106.

² On J.E.E.D. Acton, see the recent biography by Roland Hill, *Lord Acton*, (New Haven/London, 2000) see especially pp296-307. His famous statement that 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' was made in a review of Mandell Creighton's famous history of the papacy. On p300 Acton's famous comment is given

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closest Germany could get to producing a home grown radical in Acton's mould. Encouragingly, Bonhoeffer's following today in Germany within the Lutheran Church is growing apace.¹

in full: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than the office sanctifies the holder of it...'

¹ There is a vigorous *International Bonhoeffer Society* that sponsors annual conferences within Germany on Bonhoeffer's legacy; since 1971 it has organized an international Bonhoeffer conference once every four years.