

RESISTING TYRANNY

A Conference to mark the Centenary of the Birth of
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER
High Leigh Conference Centre
4 – 7 July 2006

Bob Rhodes

The Gathering

About twenty-four of us gathered to feel our way into the Bonhoeffer Conference. Had we expected more people? Certainly, the organisers had hoped for more, but we were few enough (just) to stay together as one group for all the formal sessions, avoiding the necessity of small group discussion and reporting back prescribed on our programme. Just one of many ways in which David Moore, the inspirer of the conference was willing to be flexible so that it really did take on the dynamic of an extended conversation – an aim David set out at the beginning. The programme was there to be used and adapted as seemed appropriate at the time.

Wendy Carey who had (been?) volunteered to deal with finance and domestic arrangements, facilitated our Introductory session. We were invited to introduce ourselves to the group, say something about our link with Bonhoeffer, the one who had drawn us together, and to tell the rest of the group “what you are most, and/or least likely to hear me say”. There was an enormous variety of knowledge and expertise in relation to Bonhoeffer, ranging from those for whom he had been a constant companion throughout a long academic career, to those who acknowledged a recent and brief acquaintance, but one which made enough impact to give a thirst for a deeper understanding of this remarkable man.

In other respects however, we were somewhat homogeneous – white, middle-aged, mostly male, liberal Christians, a high proportion of clergy, and a number of links emerged from the introductions. Football (the World Cup semi-finals were being played on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings) was a divider; some were devotees of the beautiful game (as followers of MK Dons and England, they had to be devoted) others had little or no interest and were put off by the rampant nationalism the World Cup seemed to inspire. We were united, however, in our interest in Bonhoeffer and our desire to see the relevance of his life and works for the church today. A number talked of modern tyrannies they were resisting – was the Football take-over of the media one such?

The Introductory session continued after our first visit to the bar and roast-beef dinner. Eating and drinking together as a way of developing friendship was an important feature of the conference. We thought Bonhoeffer would have welcomed that. This led us naturally into our first input session:

Bonhoeffer and Style – David Moore

Those who came expecting academic lectures and learned discussion were quickly disappointed. David, speaking from a wheel-chair, made no attempt to impose a pattern or even justify his thinking. Instead he teased us with a few ideas and challenged us to make what we could of them. He set the style of the conference as an extended conversation. A conversation not only among ourselves, but with Bonhoeffer in his context and in the present. David put conversation at the heart of things by offering us a translation of John’s Prologue where the Logos is Conversation.

He then went on to put before us ideas on the way present converses with past. Quoting an article by Ian McEwan, the novelist, *In a loving tradition the dead never quite lie down*. David talked of how the Bonhoeffer story and writings are still influential and how the centre of gravity had shifted back from his Letters and Papers from Prison, many people’s introduction to B, to his earlier works of scholarship such as his Ethics.

Developing this theme of the present affecting the past David drew attention to the way in which much modern social legislation has rendered commonplace many of the ideas that Bonhoeffer first articulated in the thirties, which were still revolutionary when many of us first encountered them in the sixties. Such a perspective also enabled us to view B in the round and to acknowledge his faults and limitations and not turn him into a plaster-cast saint or a model of political correctness.

David reminded us of B's love of music and sport and the importance of friendship in his life and expressed the hope that our conference be conducted in that spirit, and of the importance of listening. He challenged us to integrate poetry with politics and the importance of both in a whole life.

The camaraderie of Bar and Making Music advertised on the programme were overtaken for many of us by the imperative of watching Italy scoring two goals against Germany in the last two minutes of extra-time. Would B have been in front of the box cheering on his team to defeat, or outside enjoying a beer, the beautiful mid-summer evening and making new friends?

Worship

Refreshed by a good night's sleep we gathered in the conference Room at 8am for our Morning Worship. John Cooke, a Methodist Minister from Putney, was our Chaplain and introduced us to some of the worship of the Iona Community, where poetry and politics blend together under the spell of John Bell, whom John C described as having a real liturgical genius. He put his mark on the worship with a challenging thought for the day, linking Biblical insight and story with Bonhoeffer's thought and relating it to our present-day context. John gave the worship an even more personal and intimate stamp by ending it each morning with some sublime pieces of music which had been played at the Registration of his Civil Partnership with Stephen.

Putting Bonhoeffer in his place – Robert Bates

Fortified by a generous breakfast – three cooked meals a day, all with meat seemed like a throw-back from an earlier age - we gathered at 9.30 for a session with Robert Bates. Robert, as befits a former Infant teacher and now a lecturer in education, organised us for a session of active learning. We were divided into four groups and provided with sheets flip-chart paper with different letters of the alphabet. The task was to write down the names of places associated with Bonhoeffer and of theologians who were influential in his life, whose names began with the letters on our sheets. Robert had arranged the letters so that each group had some easy letters and some hard ones.

The session revealed the extent of Robert's knowledge of Bonhoeffer, although he told us that Bonhoeffer was *only his hobby*. It also showed a great diversity of knowledge within the conference from beginners to life-time experts; fortunately each of the small groups had someone of sufficient expertise to act as spokesman. What it revealed about Bonhoeffer was both the huge range of places that he had visited and people he'd met in a short life, the great variety of his interests and concerns and his place in the large pantheon of theologians of the late 19th and first half of the 20th Century. Because of the huge impact of Letters and Papers from Prison and the manner of his death, our post-war view of him invests his theology with greater importance than it assumed at the time. Here was just one promising young theologian in a fertile Lutheran theological scene; another illustration of David Moore's insight on the way the present affects the past.

The active learning continued after coffee, starting an extended conversation, which continued into the afternoon session when Edwin Robertson was to have led us. Edwin, who was unable to be with us for family reasons, would undoubtedly have enriched our conversing, but we managed well enough to keep it going without hesitation, repetition or deviation until tea-time.

Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic in Resistance to Tyranny – Clifford Green

In his paper, Professor Clifford Green drew attention to the way in which Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy to kill Hitler had been invoked as a justification for violence by such people as George Bush, justifying the Invasion of Iraq to the German parliament, and Pat Robertson, calling for the assassination of Hugo Chavez. In the face of such misuse it was therefore vital for us to understand Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic and how, despite his commitment to non-violence, he could contemplate tyrannicide. It was for Christians academics to counter misuse by setting the record straight.

Bonhoeffer's commitment to peace and the ideal of non-violence did not derive from any generalised principle of pacifism, rather it derived from his commitment to Jesus Christ and his belief in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. His Christian Peace Ethic is related to the Christology, which is at the heart of his theology. Love your enemies is at the heart of the Gospel. We are all enemies of God, but God loves us as He loves our enemies too. Everything depends on being able to see our enemies as beloved of God. Peace is the essence of the church.

Over the centuries tyrannicide had come to be justified by the church by the Just War principle. In this theory it was not assassination or murder but justifiable on the basis of a lesser evil to reduce the suffering of many. Bonhoeffer did not justify the conspiracy in this way. Rather it was a necessary exception in extremis, not based on principle. He did not make himself God's friend by becoming the enemy of God's enemy; rather, only by throwing himself on God's mercy could he participate in such an act. He did not abandon his Christian Peace Ethic by taking part in the conspiracy. The Peace Ethic is not a set of generalised pacifist principles, but obedience to the will of God in the particular, concrete situation.

The paper provoked intense discussion, which continued over dinner and into the evening session. The conversation ranged from the cleansing of the temple by Jesus to ways of making peace in the present day. We used Bonhoeffer's story as a sort of pole around which we wove our maypole bands of thought and argument. By this time the gap between experts and amateurs was becoming less apparent and everyone was joining in the dance. I was struck by the similarity between the way in which the Temple Cleansing and Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy were used to justify violence. *Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You build tombs for the prophets. And you say "If we had been alive in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets". So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.* Matthew 23: 29-31 (cf Luke 11:47-51); another illustration of the present changing the past.

Bonhoeffer and the Bible – Stephen Plant

The Revd Dr. Stephen Plant a tutor at Wesley College, Cambridge, and lecturer in Biblical Studies treated us to the A S Peake Memorial lecture he had delivered to the Methodist Conference earlier in the year. In this year of the Bonhoeffer anniversary he had chosen to compare and contrast both men's treatment of the Bible.

Peake, coming at the high point of the age of Biblical Criticism, was a generation before Bonhoeffer. He had promoted historical and textual criticism as a way of releasing the God who speaks; a God locked up in the text as " a bird locked in a gilded cage". Faith is a way of knowing which is distinct from that of other disciplines. Theologians and historians trade in different ways of knowing – but the historian can clear away apparent contradictions which can become an obstacle to faith. These were the sorts of tenets that most of us were schooled in at Theological College and have become the accepted wisdom of those unable to swallow a doctrine of inspired verbal inerrancy. For Peake biblical criticism had emancipated us from that view; for him the bible was a record of God's progressive revelation.

Bonhoeffer disagreed on almost every point. He moved beyond biblical criticism to a thorough-going Christological interpretation of the Bible. He pointed out that Biblical Criticism had failed to reveal God's word to the 1914 generation. The concept of the Canon of

Scripture disintegrates and is rendered meaningless by biblical criticism. The bible is the church's book and requires theological (and therefore Christological) exposition.

Do we have to choose between a historical-critical and a theological way of reading the Bible? Stephen suggested that Bonhoeffer's Christological interpretation of the Old Testament took little account of Jewish scholarship, he had little understanding of Judaism as a contemporary faith.

[Does the philosophy of Michael Polanyi provide a bridge here? Polanyi shows that scientific knowledge is not so very different from the way of knowing by faith in a religious context. Both require a leap of the imagination and a commitment of faith and the testing out in the context of a (scientific or faith) community. B.R.]

Here, as after the other sessions the aria of the lecture was followed by the recitative of the assembly. This was led, in the main, by Professor John Conway from Vancouver, Canada and the Revd Dr. John Moses from Canberra, Australia, two venerable academics, both of whom made an enlightening contribution and sometimes engaged in some verbal jousting which kept us awake when we began to flag after another large meal.

After the formal lecture and discussion on Thursday morning led by Stephen Plant, we had a free afternoon to relax. The promised croquet did not materialise, but most of us managed a walk, a snooze and some more conversation. Our early evening session was:

Bonhoeffer and the Future of Theology – led by Rachel Muers

Dr Muers, a theologian from Exeter University, a Quaker and a new mother, which latter fact prevented her being with us for the whole conference. She only arrived a lunch-time, but had spent the afternoon fruitfully finding out where we had reached as a conference, and so was able to make a contribution that was perfectly pitched to our need.

This was more of a seminar than a lecture, with Rachel throwing out provocative ideas. We marvelled at her theological as well as her physical agility. Seated with one leg under her, she seemed to tie herself in knots as she unravelled some of our half-articulated thoughts.

What can be said of God, and how can it be said? In an age when religious language has lost its force, when religious images are perverted in the service of mammon and religious phrases turned into battle slogans, how can we speak truthfully of God? Are there situations in which it becomes impossible to speak truthfully of God, when we can only keep silent? How can our God-talk become the spur of righteous action? How can we talk of God in a way that will change and renew the world?

These questions articulated by Bonhoeffer are still relevant, even though God-talk today is regarded as either irrelevant or dangerous. There are many contemporary issues that Bonhoeffer does not address, because they were not even on the horizon when the storm-clouds were gathering over Germany, but Bonhoeffer challenges us to Prayer and Righteous action in our day.

With Bonhoeffer we needed to distinguish between issues of Penultimate Concern, e.g. love of city and good citizenship and Ultimate Concern, which must never be subservient. We love the city for God's sake!

Rachel then went on to tell us of a method of ecumenical, interfaith engagement with the scriptures of the three Abrahamic faiths. She told us of the way in which Jews, Christians and Muslims engaged in a shared study of the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Koran. Called the Society for Scriptural Reasoning it required a common discipline of attention to the text in the belief that it would reveal something of God's truth. Muslims, Jews and Christians all claim to have resources to change and renew the world. Scriptural Reasoning takes those claims seriously, with a concern for what is true and for truth that will repair the world.

Despite Rachel's absence after dinner our lively conversation continued. In the absence of football on the television and the parallel conference of CoE ministerial trainers, Peter

Sharrocks was able to get out his guitar, entertain us and lead us in song. His repertoire was wide – from Sidney Carter to Buddy Holly, but most were sixties and seventies numbers, songs of our (and Pete's) era.

Gathering the Fragments

After breakfast and clearing our room – as all good conference-goers should - on the Friday morning, we gathered in the conference room to make Eucharist together as our final act of worship. Planned and executed immaculately by John Cooke, with another fitting homily from him, we felt in some way that we had completed our task. It was necessary however to Gather the Fragments, and think about what (if anything) next

Clifford Green gave us a detailed update of the new publication in German and English of the complete writings and papers of Bonhoeffer in some seventeen volumes for each language. Clifford is the general editor of the English edition, which involved, in most cases, new translations. The German publication is now almost complete. In English, Bonhoeffer major works are now available in this Fortress edition, but publication of lecture notes, sermons etc. is still awaited; to be completed by 2010. John Conway's hope that one of the weightier tomes would be purchased, so that the plastic cover could be removed and a finer point of historical/textual argument resolved, was disappointed. No one was willing to stump up the £40 or so needed. This was one for university libraries.

The final session was both a reflection of the conference, and a look at whether and how we should continue some association in the UK of Bonhoeffer aficionados. Hugh Searle, the previous Secretary of the British branch of the Bonhoeffer Society told us how it had functioned in the past (largely through his efforts) and why it had been wound up in 1998. There was some discussion of the whereabouts of the records of the Society, but little enthusiasm for resurrecting it as an organisation with formal membership. David offered to use his good offices to promote a web-site if people would make contributions. This was gratefully endorsed, especially if it could be an inter-active site. David also reminded us that the Resisting Tyranny Exhibition would be at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes during the first two weeks of September

It only remained for there to be some formal thanking of those who had provided major contributions, with the presentation of a framed Bonhoeffer cartoon as a "spoke in the wheel". Particular thanks are due to our wheel-chair hero, who had guided us through so amiably and enjoyably, providing an atmosphere in which the conversation could flow.

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