

Resisting Tyranny Conference

High Leigh Conference Centre

4 – 7 July 2006

The conference was organised through MK Colloquy by David Moore as part of the Bonhoeffer Centenary celebrations in the UK. The conference was attended by about 25 people – a disappointing number given the quality of the inputs from the speakers who made a number of keen inputs into the conference. A summary of their contributions follows.

Clifford J Green

Clifford was concerned with the high-jacking of Bonhoeffer by people like President Bush, Tony Blair and Pat Robertson. His name had been used to justify the political concept of pre-emptive action and the Iraq war. 'Right to Life' activists had also used the name of Bonhoeffer to justify the killing of a doctor working in an abortion clinic in the USA. So Clifford sought to clarify the ideas of Bonhoeffer regarding the Hitler plot and his own involvement in the action to kill Hitler

Bonhoeffer's pacifism was based on the Sermon on the Mount and he was concerned with a principle of a 'peace ethic'. The peace ethic was based on his theology of both Christology and Discipleship. The Sermon on the Mount was the guide to our actions. It was not a mirror to our sins. Loving our enemy was linked to the concept that we are all enemies of God.

The Hitler Plot was a response to the tyranny of Hitler. Bonhoeffer came to believe that the tyrant and his will to death had to be resisted.

The act of resistance was not based on a concept of self defence or 'political realism'. It was an act of free Christian responsibility undertaken while accepting the guilt it entailed. Bonhoeffer's theology could not be used to justify pre-emptive action in the context of the current world situation.

Robert Bates

In a lecture entitled. 'Putting Bonhoeffer in his Place', Robert was concerned with the influences upon Bonhoeffer that came from the philosophical and geographical context in which he lived, worked and died. A useful group task was instigated to begin the session when we were asked to recall our awareness of places Bonhoeffer visited in his life and which theologians, philosophers and key figures we could recall who were likely to have made an impact upon his thinking positively or negatively..

Stephen Plant

Stephen's focus was on Bonhoeffer's use of the bible. The lecture had been initially delivered the previous week as the A.S. Peake Memorial Lecture at the Edinburgh Methodist conference. Stephen's approach was to discuss the 'generation' gap between Peake and Bonhoeffer.

Peake worked in the context of historical biblical criticism while Bonhoeffer operated in the context of redaction criticism.

Other conclusions provided by Stephen were:

- Peake took a positive view of biblical criticism.
- Redaction criticism is seen by some today as a dead-end
- Texts should only be viewed in their received form
- Need to note the impact of feminist and liberationist theology on biblical criticism.
- Need to question whose interests are being served by the texts.

- The holocaust has had effects on biblical criticism. Peake regarded the O.T. as an impartial/incomplete revelation
- Bonhoeffer raised questions regarding the O.T. view and Judaism. This view now looks its age
- There has been a rise of Jewish biblical scholarship and a growing dialogue between Jewish/Christian readers of the bible
- There have been new readings of Paul that have looked at the view of Luther and his take on the links between Law (O.T.) and Gospel (N.T.)
- Recent Pauline studies have turned on head Paul's view of Judaism.

Rachel Muers

Rachel presented a lecture on Bonhoeffer and the future of theology. Her focus was on 'God talk'. Her starting point was the question of how we can talk responsibly about God without misrepresenting the 'truth' about the world. There was an awareness of religious language as a language of aggression.

(Question - what is a valid/honest form of god talk in the context of the age of the universe. Specifically how does this understanding affect the language of god as a personal, loving father?)

Rachel addressed the efforts to discern what it means to talk about God and identified a number of lines of thought. She stated that we were aided by Bonhoeffer in this.

- 'Life together' had relevance to the question
- The biblical texts themselves also had a place in this concern
- So too did the people who read the texts – when you met with them face to face in order to
 - Read the scriptural text
 - Read in ways as so as to hear them differently
 - Read them with people who share the same problems

The shared problems are the focus of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning which consists of Jewish/Christian and Muslim scholars. It is worth taking seriously the claims that all groups have been given resources to identify solutions.

Other elements raised by Rachel were as elements in this process were: -

- The question 'Who are you?'
- There needs to be a shared commitment to the truth
- There needs to be an agreed understanding that the process is subversive.

The Conference composition

In terms of group dynamics the conference soon took the form of 3 distinct groups.

There was the academic group consisting of the speakers who shared a level of commitment to the academic work on the life story and history of Bonhoeffer.

Then there was the main body of the group who were practising or retired ministers to whom Bonhoeffer had provided a framework in which they had performed their ministry in a way that had enabled them to be authentic in an existentialist way.

The third small group was made up of members of the conference whose discipleship had been within the context of the secular world.

For me, this group composition meant that the context of the discussion was within the frame work of a religious language that did not respond to the needs of speaking of Jesus in a world come of age. This is not to denigrate the faith, commitment and honesty of the other

members. It is a reflection that there was a limited time given to this aspect of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on the question as to how we speak of Jesus in today's world.

It is a world in which dialogue about the key issues are difficult given the fact that the key religious words that are heard come from the evangelical and/or fundamentalist wing of the church who are convinced that they have the truth and that dialogue with others of another faith or none is futile.

However, the conference was a joy in that it generated a level of fellowship and community I had certainly not experienced for a long time. This was due primarily to the level of commitment to the conference by its participants but also due to the input of John Cooke, the conference chaplain. His handling of the daily prayers and the final Eucharist was a significant element in the group growth and development.

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