Introduction: The Great Wager

Nothing, then, which Scripture says about Faith, however startling it may be at first sight, is inconsistent with the state in which we find ourselves by nature with reference to the acquisition of knowledge generally,—a state in which we must assume something to prove anything, and can gain nothing without a venture.

—John Henry Newman, "The Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason"

SAMPLE

"We live," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "in the time before the last things and believe in the last things, is that not so?"[1] We live, in other words, *in medias res*, in the middle of things. There is nothing novel in this observation, for this has been a perennial fact of human existence since our first parents were cast out of the garden. What is unprecedented, and what I attempt to account for in this book in constructive conversation with Bonhoeffer, is the distinctive character of the middle here and now. Prior to the sixteenth century there existed a recognizable consensus in Western Christendom about the origin, essence, and goal of this middle. The nonhuman world spoke of its creator's purpose and action, God was the central figure in the constitution of society, our everyday surroundings were imbued with purpose and direction, and women and men discovered the meaning of their existence from their place in this marvelous, mysterious cosmos.[2] This consensus has all but disappeared with the demise of the *corpus christianum*, leaving us with disaggregated bits and pieces of a once complex and integrated social order.

The intellectual, moral, and spiritual capital that had accumulated over the centuries was wagered on what Adam Seligman calls a new "authoritative locus of sacrality," grounded on a foundation of transcendental

1. *Wir leben im Vorletzten and glauben das Letzte, ist es nicht so?* (*DBW* 8:226, my translation).

2. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25–26.

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

dictates rather than transcendent reality. A set of "'self-evident' truths . . . as amenable to reason as the principles of Euclidian geometry" displaced conceptions of truth revealed by a transcendent Being. The stakes were nothing less than our bodies and souls, together with the earth to which bodies and souls belong. Though its outcome remains to be seen, it is doubtful that this is a wager that humankind will win.[3] Christians are not exempt from this state of affairs; faith is no longer the default position that can simply be assumed. Indeed, in many ways our forebears were responsible for this situation. What is now needed, says Bonhoeffer, is the free wager of faith (*das freie Glaubenswagnis*).[4]

It is the desire to make sense of the venture of Christianity in the modern world that has fueled the interest of many in the life and theology of Bonhoeffer, who states that faith in Christ is the great wager that can never be safe or beyond question.[5] In what follows I attempt to think with him about the distinctive features of our own time and place. His description of the profound this-worldliness of Christianity in particular provides a social imaginary around which to craft a constructive approach to the church's engagement with a world come of age, and thereby to make sense of the peculiarities of the present as we strive to live truthfully before God and bear faithful witness to our neighbors.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of profound this-worldliness is best understood as a wager about human life that participates, on the one hand, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and on the other, in the concerns and joys of a fallen creation. It stands in contrast to a second kind of worldliness, which he describes as "the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious."[6] The notion of profound this-worldliness may seem odd to those who assume that Christianity has always been primarily interested in what happens on the far side

3. Seligman, *Modernity's Wager*, 12–13.

4. *DBWE* 8:41 (*DBW* 8:24). With regard to the translation of *Wagnis* as "wager," see Green, "Pacifism and Tyrannicide," 45.

5. *DBWE* 8:41. In his address to an ecumenical conference at Fanø, Denmark, in August 1934, titled "The Church and the Peoples of the World," Bonhoeffer states, "'There is no way to peace along the way of safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture.' Though he is speaking here specifically about the way to peace, it applies equally well, *mutatis mutandis*, to his understanding of faith as a venture of responsible action. He goes on to state that "peace means to give oneself altogether to the law of God, wanting no security, but in faith and obedience laying the destiny of the nations in the hand of Almighty God, not trying to direct it for selfish purposes. Battles are won, not with weapons, but with God. They are won where the way leads to the cross" (*DBWE* 13:308–9).

6. *DBWE* 8:485.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

of the grave. Bonhoeffer contests that presumption, which he sees as rooted in a desire to be delivered from the sorrows, hardships, and anxieties of earthly life. The proclamation of Jesus Christ in both the gospels and Paul's letters, and in particular the hope of resurrection, is not an escape route out of the tasks and challenges of this world. It instead "refers people to their life on earth in a wholly new way,"[7] where they seek to act in concert with the reality of God united to the reality of the world in Christ.[8]

Bonhoeffer's theology thrusts us into the middle of an ongoing apocalyptic drama,[9] a place that enables us to see all that is happening in the world around us as implicated in God's work of judgment and reconciliation in Jesus Christ. He lives and speaks to us as a witness to the fact that to participate in Christ, and thus to be performers in this drama, is to belong to those "on whom the ends of the ages have met" (1 Cor 10:11[10]), and thus the middle of our life's journey takes the form of the time before the last. Like Karl Barth, his focus is always the reality of God in Christ breaking into the world to set it aright, but unlike Barth he spells out God's activity in a way that includes our participation in that action. What Hans Urs von Balthasar says of the Apostle Paul applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Bonhoeffer: "He shows how the drama comes from God, via Christ, to him, and how he hands it on to the community, which is already involved in the action and must bring it into reality."[11]

Bonhoeffer refuses in his theology to "smooth out the folds" of history by imposing an artificial sense of completion on it, or taking refuge in an abstract description of the world that claims an abiding universal significance.[12] Of all the figures in the Bible, he seems to identify most often in this regard with Moses. In an Advent sermon delivered in Havana, Cuba, in 1930, he says of the great prophet and lawgiver, "His life was a journey to the promise, a journey in hope through disappointments, tribulations, defeats, through apostasy and unfaithfulness; but he had a hunger for the

7. *DBWE* 8:447.

8. Returning to the earth in the power of the resurrection, as N. T. Wright puts it, often involves "dangerous and difficult tasks, up to and including martyrdom" (Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 241).

9. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 1, though many might find the notion of apocalyptic alien in connection with Bonhoeffer, when examined in the light of recent biblical scholarship into the gospels and the Pauline letters it is altogether appropriate as a description of his fundamental theological imaginary.

10. Translation by Hays, *Moral Vision*, 20. Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

11. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, 2:57.

12. Ibid., 2:54.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

promised land that drove him ever onward." And yet, at the end of his life, at the hour at which this hope was about to be fulfilled, "God says: Ascend the mountain and die."[13] Bonhoeffer returns to Moses at the end of his life in the poem "The Death of Moses," declaring, "Through death's veil you let me see at least / this, my people, go to the highest feast. / They stride into freedom, God, I see, / as I sink to your eternity."[14]

Any attempt to think constructively in conversation with Bonhoeffer about our time and place is indebted to the work that many excellent scholars have done to situate his life and thought in their original social and historical setting, above all to the editors and translators of the critical edition of his writings in German and English, and also to the excellent biographies of Eberhard Bethge and Ferdinand Schlingensiepen.[15] At the same time, however, this aspect of the interpretive enterprise alone can never decide the continuing meaning and promise of his writings. At stake, as Bonhoeffer puts it in *Ethics*, "are the times and places that concern us, that we experience, that are realities for us."[16] He understands the logic of historical existence, which, as Oliver O'Donovan has observed, "is that living in a given age means having a distinct set of practical questions to answer, neither wholly unlike those that faced other generations nor mere repetitions of them."[17] The undertaking to which he devotes his life, and the one that we must now take up, is the question of how to understand the particulars of the times and places bequeathed to us by the God of Jesus Christ as both gift (*Gabe*) and task (*Aufgabe*).[18]

What concerns us now as members of the body of Christ has principally to do with the shape of profound this-worldliness in this era after the dissolution of the *corpus christianum*.[19] The need to think carefully and truthfully about this matter has never been more pressing, for we must bear witness to what God has done, is doing, and will do, in circumstances very different from what our parents and grandparents dealt with. Whether or not we are prepared to do so, the church in Europe and North America has embarked on "an expedition into lands as yet unknown."[20] Though not all of the familiar signposts have disappeared (and a few from the early centuries

13. *DBWE* 10:586.
14. *DBWE* 8:540.
15. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*; Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.
16. *DBWE* 6:100.
17. O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 45.
18. See *DBWE* 1:278 (*DBW* 1:189); cf. *DBWE* 6:180.
19. *DBWE* 8:485.
20. Buber, "What Is Man?," 153.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

of our history have resurfaced), the church now finds itself on unfamiliar ground, struggling to take its bearings within the continuing story of the God of Jesus Christ.

Our sense of who and where we are is therefore defined in crucial respects by which story we tell of how we arrived here and now.[21] "Our past is sedimented in our present," states Charles Taylor, "and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can't do justice to where we come from."[22] An important task is therefore not simply to account for the world as it is presently configured, but also to say something about how it got this way. If we are to understand our time we must retrace the social and intellectual journey of our ancestors that brought us to our current situation. In such circumstances, and in light of the less than exemplary record of the church's witness in the last few centuries, the church can no longer claim the privileges it once enjoyed, but must recognize the presence of a deep justice in history.[23] Bonhoeffer offers both a keen sense of the ways that the status of Christian faith has changed in the wake of momentous political, economic, technological, and social changes, and perceptive insight into the ways it would continue to change. His descriptions and analyses provide us with both a point of departure and a direction to follow as we venture forth, at times boldly, at others more tentatively, into the complexities of the world where God has sent us.

I have not tried in this volume to provide a general introduction to, or a comprehensive survey of, Bonhoeffer's life and thought. It is instead an attempt to think faithfully and truthfully about this time after Christendom, with him as primary interlocutor. I seek to understand his descriptions, analyses, and insights in order to bring them to bear on the world given to us to attest to the works of God in the world. My hope is that we might take advantage of his wisdom but also learn from his occasional missteps as we work, think, and deliberate together about the claim of Jesus Christ on the world, the one to whom we bear witness through responsible action. To do this is not to ignore what his writings signified in their original settings, but to make good use of what he said and did in those circumstances, to continue down the path that he (together with many others) sets before us. It is to take up the theological trajectory he establishes in his writings (a contested task to be sure) and develop it further so that we might address

21. Among the possibilities is the story of modernity, which is the story "that you should have no story except the story you have chosen when you had no story. . . . The project of liberal societies is simply to make the freedom of choice a necessity." Hauerwas, *Dispatches*, 166–67. I shall return to this topic in chapter 3.

22. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 29.

23. *DBWE* 8:389.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

the particulars of the time and place given to us by God, and then entrust both our genuine insights and unwitting errors to those who come after us.

Interpreting a text or series of texts by an author is a performative work in itself, taking what she has done, said, or written and adding to it, responding to what she gives us with descriptions, judgments, and insights we formulate for our own context. What we produce is addressed to those with whom we currently share this earth, in the hope of developing a common reading and a shared, or at least continuous, form of life together.[24] In this sense of the term, interpretation takes place within the context of shared or overlapping projects or traditions characterized by distinctive sets of goods, habits, practices, and goals. Traditions in good working order, Bonhoeffer suggests, consist of "a historical heritage that we must make our own, use in the present, and pass on to the future."[25]

As I go about this work I try to steer a course between two false paths. On the one hand, we should never treat Bonhoeffer as an oracle, such that if we could just decipher his intentions and meanings we would have a sufficient handle on our own time. As every honest appraisal of his work acknowledges, at times he gets matters wrong, and even his best insights need to be supplemented, revised, or reconfigured, if for no other reason than to account for the changed circumstances we face in our time and place, or to take advantage of historical hindsight. His thoughts are best served when seasoned with (and, when necessary, corrected by) insights, ideas, and images from his fellow laborers. Bonhoeffer cannot speak *for* us in our struggle to be faithful members of the body of Christ, nor should we want him to, but he still has quite a bit to say *to* us on the topic of what it means to be the church in the modern world.

On the other hand, I have no wish simply to "poach"[26] isolated statements, ideas, or images from his writings for my own purposes without regard for the integrity of his work, in effect turning what he has written into a blank wall on which to tag whatever graffiti I choose. Because his writings contain so many memorable lines (some of which are the result of less than stellar translations), they are ripe for this kind of exploitation. Though the most egregious examples came early on in connection with the intense but short-lived death of God debate in the 1960s,[27] there are others who more

24. R. D. Williams, "Suspicion of Suspicion," 40.

25. *DBWE* 6:128.

26. See Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 165–76.

27. According to Eberhard Bethge, one of the principal figures of that movement, William Hamilton, acknowledged that their references to Bonhoeffer represented a "creative misuse of Bonhoeffer." Bethge, *Bonhoeffer*, 24.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

recently have deliberately engaged in this practice.[28] I suppose they should be commended for their honesty, if nothing else.

Another method of using an author's work in a constructive fashion is bricolage, which refers to the use of ideas and lines of thought without developing a more extensive continuity between one's own work and that of the other author.[29] Jeffrey Stout has argued that all great works of creative ethical thought, as well as some not so great ones, involve bricolage: "They start off by taking stock of problems that need solving and available conceptual resources for solving them. Then they proceed by taking apart, putting together, reordering, weighting, weeding out, and filling in." Stout names Thomas Aquinas as a *bricoleur*, working creatively with Jewish, Pauline, Platonic, Stoic, Augustinian, Islamic, and Aristotelian elements to form his masterwork, the *Summa Theologica*.[30] In this sense of the term, then, bricolage is a tried-and-tested method of argumentation in theological circles, making use, among other things, of what Augustine aptly refers to as Egyptian gold.[31]

What I am attempting to do with Bonhoeffer's thought, however, goes beyond bricolage. Though I do seek to go on and go further with regard to the questions he raises and the descriptions and analyses he puts forward, I nonetheless see my working in close alignment and continuity with what I take to be the main trajectories in his theology and in his life. Theology, when done well, is a microcosm of human life well lived, consisting of both recollection and nonidentical repetition. A good interpretation of an author's work may use images, ideas, and arguments in ways that he may never have anticipated, but to which (it is hoped) he would have responded favorably. This is the warrant for figural interpretations of the Old Testament in light of the coming of Christ, an approach to scripture that Bonhoeffer employs in his preaching and writing, to the consternation of biblical scholars of his day (and ours). Aristotle states that events in a good story "occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another."[32] Given the dynamic nature of God's activity in Christ, in which the reality of God is united to the reality of the world, good theological interpretations exhibit the same character.

28. See, for example, Beaudoin, *Witness to Dispossession*, 103–22.

29. See, for example, several of the essays in Clark and Mawson, *Ontology and Ethics*.

30. Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 75–76.

31. Augustine, *Confessions* VII.15; Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* II.60.

32. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a. Interpretive disagreements may therefore have more to do with the assumptions that the various participants bring to the conversation than with what is indicated or implied in a text.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

Though my primary aim in this book is constructive and not exegetical, a comprehensive picture of Bonhoeffer's overall theological project does emerge, elements of which some will contest (and not always the same elements). One persistent line of interpretation that has taken hold in North America in particular—but which, I contend, does not do justice to Bonhoeffer—argues that during the war he abandons his earlier embrace of a peace ethic and adopts a more "realistic" ethic that converges with the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr.[33] Renate Wind, for example, states that "it had become clear to him that his own ethical rigorism no longer worked; that it was too much bound up with his own personal search for perfection."[34]

By contrast, I count myself among those who see a substantial continuity between his earlier and later writings, though it is important to allow for development and change of emphasis as he matures and faces new and difficult challenges. I submit that reading him in this way not only makes better sense of what he writes, but it also makes for a more faithful and incisive theology in our time. Among other things, continuity means that, as Ernst Feil puts it, "Bonhoeffer differentiated between Christianity or Christian faith and religion, but he could not separate Christianity and church."[35] Moreover, to the extent that it even makes sense to talk about Bonhoeffer as proposing a "realism" of some sort, his understanding of what is real is not determined pragmatically by what will "work," but by what God has accomplished, continues to accomplish, and finally will achieve in Jesus Christ.

Attempts to make Bonhoeffer fit neatly into categories such as evangelical or mainline, conservative or progressive, are also bound to come up short.[36] The complexities and nuances of ecclesial and political life in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century do not map cleanly onto the intellectual and social landscape of the United States, a fact he documents in his reflections on Protestantism in America, "Protestantism Without Reformation."[37] Moreover, his understanding of human existence is from start to finish eschatological, which rules out assimilation to any political stance in a fallen world. No doubt he has affinities with certain currently dominant categories—for example, the notion of human rights, though even here his understanding, unlike classic liberal conceptions rooted in

33. See, for example, Marsh, *Strange Glory*, 315, 341–42; Kelly and Nelson, *Cost of Moral Leadership*, 108; and Gides, *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide*.

34. Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 144.

35. Feil, *Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 175.

36. See, for example, Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, and Marsh, *Strange Glory*.

37. *DBWE* 15:438–62.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

the philosophical tradition of John Locke, is inextricably connected with a determinate conception of the good in Christ.[38]

Though some have asserted that toward the end of life Bonhoeffer downplays the tight connection between his Christology and the church,[39] there is little evidence that he departs from his earlier assertion that it is only "because proclamation and the sacraments are carried out in the church" that we can "inquire about Christ."[40] If anything, a profound this-worldliness in a post-Christendom world calls for a renewed emphasis on ecclesiology. As he puts it at the end of *Ethics*, the church should be seen both as an instrument and a means to the end of effectively proclaiming Christ to the whole world, *and* as the goal and center of all that God is doing with the world, as "the place where the world fulfills its own destiny; the church-community is the 'new creation,' the 'new creature,' the goal of God's ways on earth." It is in this context that he invokes the crucial concept of *Stellvertretung* to define the connection between this double divine purpose, as the Christian community both bears witness to a fallen world, but also stands in the place in which that world should stand.[41]

The connection that Bonhoeffer draws between Christ and the church is not, however, restricted to what happens within either the material or the spiritual confines of the church, for the church communicates the unlimited message of Christ through its delimited resources, and the universality of that message summons believers back into the delimited domain of the church-community.[42] The church exists, in other words, to demonstrate to a world come of age that it is different just to the extent that God became human, lived among us, died and was raised from the dead; it exists to show the world that the boundaries of tribe and language, people and nation, no longer define what it means to be a human being; it exists so that the world is allowed to be the world, to be that which is loved, judged, and reconciled in Jesus Christ; it exists not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world, offering itself as a sacrament of union with God and unity among humans.

38. Bonhoeffer states that human beings have no rights before God (hence the notion of human rights as such has no ontological basis), but the gift of natural life does entail the notion of rights, though it cannot be rightly understood apart from the particularity of social and historical circumstances (*DBWE* 6:180).

39. See, for example, Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ, for Us, Today?," 151.

40. *DBWE* 12:310.

41. *DBWE* 6:404–5 (*DBW* 6:408). The concept of *Stellvertretung* has no English cognate, and has been variously (though not happily) translated as "deputyship" and "vicarious representative action." Though from time to time I use the latter expression, for the most part I leave it untranslated or render it in an extended phrase such as Christ's suffering, or the church's action, on behalf of the world.

42. *DBWE* 6:405.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

One of my assumptions in developing this portrait of Bonhoeffer is that he is a dogmatician and not an ethicist as that term is typically used. The discipline of ethics, as O'Donovan has argued, has no specific set of objects, no particular slice of reality, for which it can claim proprietary ownership. It is rather "the explication of the logic of practical reason that directs our conduct, individual and collective." Ethical reasoning terminates, not in a descriptive judgment about things in general or about some particular feature of the world, but in a practical judgment having to do with how we act in connection with this or that feature of the world. As such, practical judgment is dependent on some assumed set of descriptions about the world, which is another way of saying that it presupposes a social and cosmic imaginary. Practical reason is an extension of descriptive reason broadly conceived, building on these descriptions in order to indicate the path we should take through the world.[43]

Bonhoeffer's theological ethics, by contrast, explicitly and extensively engage in developing further the descriptive and referential work of dogmatics or systematic theology. He states in *Ethics* that the problem of Christian ethics "is God's reality revealed in Christ become real . . . among God's creatures, just as the subject matter of doctrinal theology is the truth of God's reality revealed in Christ."[44] This approach to Christian ethics leads him almost immediately to a consideration of the question of the good, which together with truth and beauty comprise the transcendentals, each of which is convertible with being. Theological inquiry can be carried out from the perspective of any one of the three, and Bonhoeffer increasingly operates from the good in his writings, but never in isolation from truth and, to a lesser extent, beauty.[45]

The importance of recognizing Bonhoeffer's writings as dogmatic in nature is in part to account for their poetic character. The ability to know how to go on and go further in the use of the expressions of a language, says Alasdair MacIntyre, constitutes that part of the ability of every language user that is poetic. Poets do not have an exclusive claim to this ability, but only develop it to a preeminent degree.[46] Bonhoeffer exhibits this ability

43. O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 37–38.

44. *DBWE* 6:49.

45. Though he mentions beauty only in passing in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer refers to it numerous times in his prison writings. That said, he does little to reverse what Natalie Carnes describes as the marginalization and exile of beauty "from her once-central location in theological thought and scholarly work" (*Beauty*, 1.) The work of Carnes and other theologians to restore beauty to a central place in theology suggests a way of distinguishing between approaches to dogmatics in terms of which transcendental takes the lead: doctrine (truth), ethics (goodness), or aesthetics (beauty).

46. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 382.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

as well, his works consisting of "beautiful iterations of doctrine, a sort of visionary orthodoxy."[47] His books, sermons, and essays are replete with descriptions that have captivated the imagination of countless readers for decades. But as Christian Gremmels cautions, Bonhoeffer's focus "is *not* the 'coming of age,' 'this-worldliness,' and 'religionlessness' of the modern world." Though these enigmatic expressions are winsome and compelling, they function only as auxiliary terms that derive their significance solely in relation to Bonhoeffer's primary concern, which is "the claim of Jesus Christ on the world that has come of age," and these other ideas are noteworthy only to the extent that they serve the theological task of witnessing to Jesus Christ in the present.[48]

The job of parsing these terms constitutes the grammatical work of theology, a task that Bonhoeffer takes seriously, as even a casual perusal of his Christology lectures demonstrates.[49] Grammar, writes Ludwig Wittgenstein, "tells what kind of object anything is,"[50] up to and including that object we call the world. Our ability to reason, to "'take in' as a unity, the whole and the universal in reality,"[51] presupposes a stable (though never static) grammatical structure to a language in use. As a form of critical inquiry, grammar attends to the ways a particular community uses language at a specific time and place, explicating what it makes sense to say about something for members of that community, what it is for talk about some *thing*, be it person, event, or object, to qualify *as* talk about that thing. It thus "articulates the terms in which that kind of thing can intelligibly be represented (truly or falsely)."[52]

The work of grammar is a vital component of the interpretive work of theology, for it is through the church's distinctive, even peculiar use of the languages that it has appropriated throughout the centuries that theology formulates its understanding of how women and men should live, move, and have their being in the world, and of the origin, essence, and goal of that life, that movement, that existence. The practices of intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation that take place in and through the church—baptism, Eucharist, catechetical and mystagogical instruction, confession, proclamation, scripture reading, prayer, reconciliation, the giving and receiving of counsel, and works of mercy and justice—presuppose a stable

47. Robinson, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 115.
48. *DBWE* 8:588–89, Gremmel's emphasis.
49. *DBWE* 12:299–360.
50. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 116e.
51. *DBWE* 6:174.
52. Mulhall, "Wittgenstein on Faith," 200.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

understanding of how we use language. Crafted slowly, sometimes painfully over many centuries in a cautious, approximate, and often negative mode, this ever-evolving grammar is foundational for reading scripture, but also for reading the "text" of the world and all it contains. A theological grammar in good working order is therefore a necessary condition for the body of Christ to worship, act, and think as a corporate body that exists to testify, by truthful proclamation and responsible action on behalf of the whole world, to the presence and power of the triune God.

Finally, given Bonhoeffer's repeated emphasis on the claim of Christ on the whole of life and on the whole person,[53] a profound this-worldliness is from beginning to end political, or as he puts it in *Discipleship*, "political."[54] The scare quotes are significant (as they always are in his writings), suggesting that the church is distinct from the type of polity represented by the state (which many simply assume to be the sole and thus paradigmatic form of political association), and yet it directly challenges the claim that the state makes on its inhabitants regarding the whole of life. Bonhoeffer struggles with the question of the relationship between politics and "politics," statecraft and churchcraft, his entire life, which is why his interpreters who have very different positions on this matter can find something to support their views in his writings. He initially posits a very close relationship between the church and the German people [*Volk*]: "Every people . . . has within itself a call from God to create its history, to enter into the struggle that is the life of the nations. This call must be heeded amid the growth and development so that it takes place before the face of God. God calls a people to diversity, to struggle, to victory."[55] Though he later moves away from this kind of cultural and racial nationalism to embrace the nascent ecumenism of the day and articulate a peace ethic rooted in the Sermon on the Mount, he never does come to a definitive conclusion, and thus I must go beyond what he explicitly offers.

The theological significance of Bonhoeffer's ecclesial focus needs to be considered in juxtaposition to a type of nostalgia for Christendom on the part of many theologians. This nostalgia is not for the forms that the *corpus christianum* took in the past, which he derides as the *salto mortale*, the death leap, back to the Middle Ages.[56] It is instead a kind of cosmopolitan aspiration that is often accompanied by a de-emphasis on the church. Such aspirations seldom stray far from imperialist aims, beginning with the

53. *DBWE* 6:97, 146–47; *DBWE* 8:395, 456–57.
54. *DBWE* 4:261–62.
55. *DBWE* 10:373.
56. *DBWE* 8:478.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

Stoic writings of Marcus Aurelius, who hands on the fruit of a long history of speculation in antiquity about the links between the order of the physical world, the *cosmos*, exemplified in the motion of the stars and planets, and that of the human world, the *polis*.[57] Though all such global aspirations, whether Christian or Stoic in form, are predicated, as Gerald Schlabach puts it, on "a vision of *shalom*" in which "right relationship with God is rightly ordering and reintegrating every relationship and all of life," their chief failing is that they do not reckon with the Faustian bargain they must make with the technological powers that currently organize the world. In spite of their good intentions, all such efforts invariably represent "a premature effort to grasp through faithless violence at the fullness of life that is God's to give fully at the eschaton."[58] In Bonhoeffer's terms, the cosmopolitan impulse represents the compromise solution to what he calls the "lasting and irremovable tension" between the present age and the age to come, a move that absolutizes the essence of human beings as they presently are.[59]

The alternative to such premature and presumptuous hopes, grounded as they are on the conflation of an overly realized eschatology with the will to mastery that animates the social technologies that organize life in the modern world, is not a sectarian withdrawal of some sort on the part of the church. On the contrary, as Bonhoeffer puts it in the preface to *Discipleship*, "Today it seems so difficult to walk with certainty the narrow path of the church's decision and yet remain wide open to Christ's love for all people, and in God's patience, mercy and loving-kindness (Titus 3:4) for the weak and godless. Still, both must remain together, or else we will follow merely human paths." He repeats this position in *Ethics*, stating that any action in accord with reality as it exists in the uniting of God and the world in Christ must both acknowledge the status quo and protest against it: "Affirmation and contradiction come together in concrete action in the world."[60]

In other words, the church must maintain its distinctiveness, not over against humanity as a whole, but as Rowan Williams states, "from all communities and kinships whose limits fall short of the human race,"[61] and thus which comprise the merely human paths that prematurely seek to establish what is God's to achieve. The church, according to its distinctive "political" character, exists and acts to "'remember' the future" for all nations and peoples, and in remembering become for the world an imaginative

57. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 3.11, 4.3.
58. Schlabach, "Deuteronomic or Constantinian," 456.
59. *DBWE* 6:104, 154.
60. *DBWE* 4:40; *DBWE* 6:223–24.
61. R. D. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 233.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

interpretation of the world "in terms of the presence to it of Christ, its future."[62] Through the interaction of memory (starting with scripture and liturgy) and imagination (the ability to create adequate representations of reality by combining elements provided by memory[63]) the body of Christ becomes the sacramental sign of what Bonhoeffer calls the polyphony of life.[64]

The emphasis on the church is dialectical and ironic. It is not the Kingdom of God, and as history testifies, it too often reverts to what Bonhoeffer names the *sicut deus*, the fallen character of humankind that erupts from our idolatrous desire to be like God rather than participate in Christ's re-creation of the *imago Dei*.[65] The community and communion of Christ is implicated in virtually every onerous aspect of a world come of age, and we must live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction with it.[66] And yet in spite of its decadence, corruption, and "sheer silliness," writes Herbert McCabe, "there is nowhere else to go . . . here are the words of eternal life, here is the language, the human presence and contact of the future." The ironic and dialectical characterization of the church is not merely negative, however, nor is it simply a warning not to confuse the church for the kingdom. Instead, it enables us to detect in our present language the presence of the language of the future, and thus the communication of that future to us.[67]

Structure of the Book

In the first three chapters I examine two concepts that Bonhoeffer develops in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one having to do with the central idea of the this-worldliness of Christianity, and the other, with the ironic myth of a world come of age. As I have already noted, Bonhoeffer asserts that Christianity has at its core a deep and abiding this-worldliness that is grounded in the apocalyptic witness of the New Testament to the uniting of the reality of God with the reality of the world in Jesus Christ. The notion of this-worldliness may be disconcerting for those whose understanding

62. McCabe, *Law, Love and Language*, 141, 143.

63. R. D. Williams, *Edge of Words*, 45.

64. *DBWE* 8:393–94.

65. *DBWE* 3:111–14.

66. Guardini, *Church and the Catholic*, 55.

67. McCabe, "Comment," 229; *God Matters*, 178. Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan suggest an alternative in their book *Occupy Religion*, pointing to the recent Occupy Movement protests as a possibility. But as Eugene McCarraher points out, this movement, and theologies tied to it and to all such movements, cannot deliver what they promise. McCarraher, "Love Covers a Multitude."

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

of Christian faith see it as concerned primarily about the next world, the so-called afterlife. Nevertheless, he argues that the gospel addresses humankind in the midst of their lives now, not in a shallow or banal manner, but in a way that "shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection."[68] As for the irony implicit in the notion of a world come of age, Bonhoeffer's main concern in proposing this idea has to do precisely with how best to confront the technological organization and governance of life in the modern world with the uniting of God and world in Christ.

The next three chapters critique the concepts of religion, culture, and race, all crucial terms in the lexicon and grammar of the modern world. Over the last five hundred years these notions have served as social technologies used by the governing powers of the age to describe, differentiate, classify, and control the alien, the stranger, the other. Bonhoeffer's critique of the concept of religion as a constructive theological category for interpreting Christian life and thought provides the initial basis for crucial insights into the ways a world come of age accounts for difference using these notions. Such a critique helps the church understand not only how the world got to this juncture but also how it was implicated in their parturition, in order that it may extricate itself from their influence and cultivate once again a profound this-worldliness.

There are other concepts that I could have included with religion, culture, and race in this study—for example, nature, a term that also has undergone a substantial and significant change in meaning.[69] Up until the thirteenth century it principally denoted the essential character of a thing in accordance with its specific end and function, and thus when it was a fully developed member of its species. Should one pose a question about nature, the question would come back, the nature of what? In other words, what is it that you are asking about? The nature of a seed, in this regard, is to become a fully developed plant. The nature of a human being is to be a fully rational man or woman (sadly, this understanding was denied to too many in antiquity). We still retain this sense of the concept when we say that it is the nature of a carnivorous animal, a wolf or tiger, to hunt and kill other animals for its food. We also use it, though less often, to speak about moral traits of human being (e.g., we say it is natural for parents to care for their offspring).

68. *DBWE* 8:485–86.

69. Other concepts not dealt with in this volume include gender and sexuality. Perhaps the most sustained treatment of these contested ideas from the perspective that I develop here is Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

In the thirteenth century a distinction was introduced between supernatural and natural activities and ends. The notion of the supernatural was correlated with the gift of divine grace, which opened up room to think about what was natural as a given rather than as a gift. As David Burrell rightly observes, "A conceptual device which was to prove immensely useful in opening traditional Augustinian theology to assimilate the analysis of Aristotle unwittingly augmented a tendency to 'naturalize' the created universe and so further obscured the theological import of the Christian profession of faith in the creator."[70] A conceptual instrument was now in hand to make a hard-and-fast separation between the human and nonhuman worlds so that the mastery of the latter by the former becomes imaginable. A series of critical divisions followed: the separation of, and sovereignty of, history from nature, the distinction of *Naturwissenschaften* from *Geisteswissenschaften* and "fact" from "value" in nineteenth-century academic discourse, and so on. As "nature," the nonhuman aspects of creation are repositioned for our use as "natural resources" in pursuit of our self-selected values. Whereas it once designated an order of things that was independent of human thought and action, standing over against our ability to engage and shape the world of which we were inextricably a part, "nature" now refers to that which has value only to the extent that we confer it.[71] The current ecological crisis facing all humanity is the most evident consequence of this technological development.

I have not expanded the critique of "nature" into a separate chapter for several reasons, in part because it is not a focal concern for Bonhoeffer, but primarily because it is deserving of much greater explication and development than I am able to provide for it in this work. Its absence should not be interpreted therefore as a tacit assertion that it is a minor issue in relation to the other foci in this study. Global climate change could well be the proverbial straw that collapses the entire technological organization that has been built over the last several centuries. If this turns out to be the case, it would constitute the ultimate irony associated with the myth of a world come of age, creating the instruments of its own demise.[72]

The next two chapters take a constructive turn, as I develop two of Bonhoeffer's more seminal insights into the character of Christian faith. The first chapter revolves around his contention that the church's life and witness have suffered because we have failed to read the New Testament in

70. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation*, 3–4.

71. Rouse, *Knowledge and Power*, 66.

72. For those who wish to pursue this most important question, I would suggest that they begin with Northcott, *A Political Theology of Climate Change*.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd

light of the Old. Implicit in his admonition, and especially in the selection of Old Testament texts he cites in his prison correspondence, is the basis of a serious challenge to the varieties of supersessionism that have fueled the distortions wrought within the body politic of the church by the technologies of religion, culture, and race. In the following chapter I extend Bonhoeffer's metaphor of the polyphony of life, developing it as a way of describing the ecclesial shape and apocalyptic character of profound worldliness in a world come of age.

The last chapter, in which I take up the question of Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy against Adolf Hitler during World War II, forms a kind of coda to the book. His decision to cast his lot with the conspirators quickly became the focus of the debate about what it means to act responsibly for others. I propose to refocus attention around the question of what we in our time and place should learn from his decision in comparison to that made by another group of Christians in France.

SAMPLE

© 2016 James Clarke and Co Ltd