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The Influence of Wilhelm Dilthey on Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*

From Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer asks the question of “what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today.”¹ The question regarding Christ links the Tegel theology with Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, and what is new in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* is found in the various formulations from Tegel that expand Bonhoeffer's christological understanding by adding a critique of religion. Bonhoeffer goes further in his evaluation of maturity and autonomy. Whereas in the *Ethics*, especially in the fragment “Heritage and Decay,”² he negatively interprets the development of autonomy as leading ultimately to nihilism,³ we find quite the opposite in the *Letters*. Here Bonhoeffer evaluates positively the autonomy of the world, of human beings and of life, and he affirms the coming-of-age process. Between the *Ethics* and these positive statements in the *Letters* he had read Wilhelm Dilthey.

Scholars have only marginally discussed the question of Dilthey's influence as a “philosopher of life.” After Eberhard Bethge's⁴ and then Ernst Feil's⁵ initial and general references to the significance of the “philosophy of life” for Bonhoeffer, it was T. R. Peters⁶ who first pointed out concretely that Bonhoeffer's appropriation of Dilthey's thought was not limited to the latter's historicism but included his philosophy of life as well. However, Peters did not thoroughly examine how Bonhoeffer appropriated elements of Dilthey's philosophy of life and dealt instead with the continuing significance of Nietzsche's philosophy of life on Bonhoeffer's work. It

¹ Letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge (30 April 1944), in *LPP*, 279 (*DBW* 8, 402).

² *DBWE* 6, 103–133, esp. 122–123 (*DBW* 6, 93–124, esp. 113–114).

³ The only positive aspect in this fragment addresses the liberation of *ratio*; cf. *DBWE* 6, 117–118 (*DBW* 6, 107–108).

⁴ Cf. Eberhard Bethge, “The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology,” *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 51 (1961), 1–38.

⁵ Cf. Ernst Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Munich 1971), 132, note 20.

⁶ Cf. T.R. Peters, *Die Präsenz des Politischen in der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Munich 1976), 133–135.

was only the study of Karl Bartl⁷ and the book by Hans-Jürgen Abromeit⁸ that took things further. Bartl demonstrates Dilthey's relevance to Bonhoeffer's "understanding of reality" as *one* reality, and shows that Bonhoeffer closely adheres not only to Dilthey's "presentation of history" but to his "basic concept of life."⁹ But Bartl does not apply this insight to the view of religion in the *Letters* and instead stays with the theme of his study, namely "Theology and Secularity." Abromeit also demonstrates Dilthey's significance for Bonhoeffer as a philosopher of life, working this out for the *Ethics*. Yet in the *Ethics*, Dilthey is not yet providing any new impulses to Bonhoeffer. Only in the *Letters* does Bonhoeffer's appropriation of Dilthey emerge through his own systematic reading. Abromeit does not address the importance of Dilthey's philosophy of life for the *Letters*, though he does coin the term "life theology" for the later Bonhoeffer, thereby showing the close connection with the philosophy of life, one that he alleges consists in "the interdependence of understanding and experience undergirding the two."¹⁰

In short, these two initiatives fail to throw new light on the connection between the philosophy of life on the one hand and the critique of religion on the other. Commensurately, they also do not illuminate the importance of Dilthey's *concept of life* for the nonreligious interpretation. However, they certainly do raise the pertinent question of Dilthey's possible significance for Bonhoeffer as a philosopher of life.

The following discussion will concentrate exclusively on the writing by Dilthey on which Bonhoeffer worked beginning in March 1944 during his incarceration, namely *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*.¹¹ There Dilthey combines the concept of life with that of history into a particular interpretation of history, namely historicism.¹² To acknowledge the interdependence of *history* and *experience*, it is decisive to recognize Dilthey's conception of a *historical philosophy of life* ("historische Lebensphilosophie" or "Historismus").

In studying *Weltanschauung und Analyse*, Bonhoeffer probably proceeded chronologically. Several considerations suggest this, for example,

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¹⁰ Abromeit, *Dietrich Bonhoeffers erfahrungsbezogene Christologie*, 126.

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¹² See for more detail my study, *A Theology of Life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, 1998) and "Dietrich Bonhoeffers theologische Rezeption der Lebensphilosophie Wilhelm Diltheys," in *Dilthey-Jahrbuch* (2000), 260–270.

the citations from Giordano Bruno on the friend and from Spinoza on the affections in Bonhoeffer's "Miscellaneous Thoughts"¹³; these references are found at the end of *Weltanschauung und Analyse* (341f). Bonhoeffer cites these sentences in July 1944 – at the end of his reading of Dilthey. We can assume that at this time the whole of Dilthey is in view. In this context, mention of the philosopher and scientist G. Cardano in both the *Letters* and *Weltanschauung und Analyse* is also revealing. In a letter at the end of April 1944, Eberhard Bethge draws his friend's attention to Cardano's significance.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer answers him at the beginning of May 1944 – when he begins to read Dilthey. "I don't know Cardano. Is he translated into German?"¹⁵ In the middle of June, he then says to Bethge in an aside, "By the way, there's a good deal about Cardano in Dilthey."¹⁶ Dilthey first mentions Cardano on page 284 of *Weltanschauung und Analyse*.¹⁷ From this reference we can conclude that by mid-June Bonhoeffer had already read over half, if not more, of *Weltanschauung und Analyse*, while at the beginning of May he is quite obviously just beginning to read Dilthey. In any event, he has not yet come to Dilthey's discussion of the Renaissance philosopher.

Bonhoeffer's mention of Cardano exemplifies how carefully he is reading *Weltanschauung und Analyse*. Here I should mention other names that acquired meaning for him as he studied Dilthey: Herbert of Cherbury, Hugo Grotius, Jean Bodin, Michel de Montaigne, Giordano Bruno.¹⁸ This selection is limited to the key letter of 16 July 1944. Bonhoeffer associates these names with specific themes and with those serving the "one great development that leads to the world's autonomy."¹⁹ These themes include "theology" (Herbert of Cherbury), "morality" (Montaigne, Bodin) and "politics" (Machiavelli); the name of Hugo Grotius is mentioned in connection with the theme of "autonomy" in human society.²⁰

Quite obviously Bonhoeffer is systematically organizing *Weltanschauung und Analyse* according to certain thematic groups and groups of names from the perspective of autonomy and coming of age. In the 16 July letter he then brings together various historical reflections in the different sec-

¹³ LPP, 375–376 (DBW 8, 550–552).

¹⁴ LPP, 274–275 (DBW 8, 394–396).

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tions of *Weltanschauung und Analyse*.²¹ Yet nowhere in that volume does Dilthey himself actually examine “autonomy” or “coming of age” as concepts in and for themselves.²² As an example, consider how Dilthey understands Grotius. He sees how in the first three decades of the seventeenth century Pierre Charron, Francis Bacon, and Herbert of Cherbury establish the line of thought that Grotius will then carry forward: The “natural system of the moral world”²³ is established. Dilthey examines the “task” (277), “method” (278), and “concepts” (279) of Grotius, and finds that the “universally valid concepts” are “life concepts” (278-79). These concepts are “coherent in the entirety of life and draw from life their persuasive power” (279). The “legal concepts” thus deduced (namely “life concepts,” 280) following Grotius are concepts whose “validity does not depend on faith in their grounding within a teleological order resting in God. “Even if there were no God,” the principles of natural law would maintain their independent and universal validity” (280).

The famous citation of Grotius, which Bonhoeffer renders in Latin,²⁴ thus appears in the immediate context of the philosophy of life. Dilthey adduces Grotius as a Renaissance legal thinker who takes the concepts of life as his point of departure, thereby renewing “the true intention of Roman jurisprudence.”²⁵ The concept of justice is a life concept. This also explains why Bonhoeffer speaks about *life* without God²⁶ and why his historical excursions on striving for autonomy in various areas all end up basically talking about life.

From Dilthey, Bonhoeffer saw that Grotius’ statement is an assertion about life and “that we must *live* in a world ‘etsi deus non daretur.’”²⁷ What we find in the case of Grotius applies as well to the other themes and

²¹ Cf. also the parallel letter of 8 June 1944 in *LPP*, 324–329 (*DBW* 8, 474–483).

²² Scholars have repeatedly noticed that Bonhoeffer, too (motivated by Dilthey), variously concluded his historical excursions by focusing on the thematic material of life. Cf. my discussion of the letters of 8 June and 16 July 1944 in Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, 126–130.

²³ Dilthey, *Weltanschauung und Analyse*, 276.

²⁴ Scholars have not determined the source from which Bonhoeffer derives the Latin version “etsi deus non daretur.” Dilthey, *Weltanschauung*, 280, cites this expression in German (English rendering: “as if there were no God”). The original version in H. Grotius, *De jure belli ac pacis libri tres. Prolegomena* 11,7 reads: *etiamsi daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequid, non esse deum* (“Even if we were to give – which cannot be done without great sacrilege – that there is no God”). Bonhoeffer uses a construction with Latin *datur*; Grotius also uses *datur* twice. I conclude that Bonhoeffer was familiar with the citation in its original, longer Latin version, and under the influence of the (shortened) German rendering in Dilthey constructed the Latin form that we now have from him.

²⁵ Dilthey, *Weltanschauung und Analyse*, 279.

²⁶ Cf. *LPP*, 360 (*DBW* 8, 533).

²⁷ *LPP*, 359–360 (*DBW* 8, 530); emphasis added.

names mentioned above.²⁸ A larger examination of Dilthey's work reveals that all the names enumerated there are associated with the philosophy of life.²⁹ Regardless of the sphere in which Dilthey observes the striving to come of age or to attain autonomy, he always begins with human life as it is actually lived in a given epoch. The maturity of the world derives from the maturity of life in the world. Life as a cognitive-theoretical maxim becomes the historical understanding of a given epoch. The autonomy of life becomes the autonomy of human beings and of the world. Bonhoeffer consciously goes along with this progression, beginning hypothetically with the conclusion: "it is one great development that leads to the autonomy of the world."³⁰ When he speaks elsewhere of the autonomy of human beings and of life, he lets us know that he is interpreting Dilthey's cognitive-theoretical position – namely, life – in a christological manner: the "claim of a world that has come of age by Jesus Christ."³¹ In the preceding sentence of the letter just cited, Bonhoeffer demands that "the entirety of human life" must be claimed by Christ. The conceptual pairs "mature world" and "worldly life," as well as "world come of age" and "mature life," can thus be used alongside one another.

Bonhoeffer's formulation of the theme of his Tegel theology progresses from the general to the particular, from the initial christological question to the appropriation of earthly life. We can discern the following development in his christological understanding of life (emphasis added):

1. Initial question: "... who *Christ* really is for us today."³²
2. Basic theme: "*Christ and the world come of age*."³³
3. Ethical theme: The "*appropriation of the world come of age* through Jesus Christ."³⁴
4. Theme of life: "*Jesus lays claim to the entirety of human life for himself*."³⁵
5. Theme: The biblical "*blessing is the appropriation of earthly life for God*."³⁶
6. Ecclesiological conclusion: The church "must tell people of all vocations what *life with Christ* is, what it means "to be for others."³⁷

²⁸ One notices that the mention of names is important for both Dilthey and Bonhoeffer. Dilthey explicates his "historical philosophy of life" with the aid of such names (Bruno, Montaigne, Bodin), while Bonhoeffer similarly explicates his "nonreligious interpretation" with the aid of such names, whereby biblical names acquire significance alongside the philosophers taken from Dilthey such as Paul (306ff., 369), Cornelius, Jairus, Nathanael (396).

²⁹ See my study *A Theology of Life*, 68ff and 104ff.

³⁰ *LPP*, 359 (*DBW* 8, 529–530).

³¹ *LPP*, 342 (*DBW* 8, 504).

³² Letter, 30 April 1944 in *LPP*, 279 (*DBW* 8, 402).

³³ Letter, 8 June 1944 in *LPP*, 288 (*DBW* 8, 479).

³⁴ Letter, 30 June 1944 in *LPP*, 342 (*DBW* 8, 504).

³⁵ Letter, 30 June 1944 in *LPP*, 342 (*DBW* 8, 504).

³⁶ Letter 28 July 1944 in *LPP*, 374 (*DBW* 8, 548).

³⁷ "Outline for a Book" in *LPP*, 383 (*DBW* 8, 560).

From his initial christological question (1), Bonhoeffer formulates the basic theme of his Tegel theology (2), then applies it ethically (3), and also with respect to “life” (4); and finally gives it an exclusive concrete orientation toward life (5), including the ecclesiological conclusion of this Christology of life (6). The essence of these formulations is thus Christian life and life come of age.

When I said that Bonhoeffer applies Dilthey’s philosophy of life christologically, I am speaking of the unique accent he gives to his reading of Dilthey. Our examination of *Weltanschauung und Analyse* repeatedly encountered Dilthey’s concept of religion, one he obviously draws into his own philosophy of life. His intention is to show the relationship between life and religiosity in their various manifestations during the Renaissance and Reformation. For example, Ulrich Zwingli’s “religiosity” is allegedly “true life.”³⁸ Dilthey raises the question of “true religion” in regard to Jean Bodin (151) and also admires “the religious vivacity of Luther” (231). On the whole, Dilthey is inclined to engage in criticism whenever religion and life are isolated and opposed to one another (137). The *whole* of life is for him *religious* life: “God wants to be enjoyed” (160). Religion is to be asserted “in life” (237), and Dilthey thus demands a “livable” religion – a religion of the here and now. His *Weltanschauung und Analyse* contains no critique of religion, something already explicated with respect to his other writings; nor, according to him, can any sort of religionlessness come about.³⁹

In substance, a critique of religion and the notion of religionlessness as two significant motifs in Bonhoeffer’s conception of religion do *not* derive from Dilthey, although the critique of metaphysics – as a further basic motif of Dilthey’s philosophy of life – exerts considerable influence on him. Bonhoeffer emphatically followed the critique of metaphysics as grounded in the philosophy of life. The critique of religion, however, is grounded for him by means of the critique of religion presented by Karl Barth.⁴⁰ Where Dilthey finds an antithesis between *life* and *metaphysics*, Bonhoeffer juxtaposes *life* and *religion*. Where Dilthey interprets *life* and *inwardness* from a mutually inclusive perspective, Bonhoeffer does the same with *life* and *Jesus Christ*.

Given Bonhoeffer’s systematic reading of Dilthey, the concept of life becomes his basic cognitive-theoretical concept.⁴¹ From the philosophy of

³⁸ Dilthey, *Weltanschauung und Analyse*, 226.

³⁹ Cf. Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, 138, according to which the notion of a “religionless condition” is historically incomprehensible.

⁴⁰ See my study *A Theology of Life*, 31–99.

⁴¹ Here the Tegel theology differs from the fragments to the *Ethics*. Although both in and prior to his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer appropriates elements of the philosophy of life, he does not yet understand these as motifs integral to cognition. The ethical theme is Christ and the good. It is

life, Bonhoeffer acquired an important impulse for his understanding of life, and the theological understanding of life remains determinative for his reading of Dilthey. Viewed philosophically, life is equivocal; it becomes unequivocal only in view of Christ. Thus we arrive at the question of *how* this life in *being for others* really looks like. This is the boundary question regarding an unequivocal understanding of the concept of *life*. Was Bonhoeffer able to define this concept unequivocally? Here we become more acutely aware of the fragmentary character of his late theology, and must answer the question with a *no*. He passes onto us the task of searching for the answer. Although various reflections in the *Ethics* might help us, they are too fragmentary. In his Tegel theology, Bonhoeffer equipped us with the guiding questions on the correct relationship between life come of age and Christian faith – that was his theme, and it was the essence of the question of nonreligious interpretation. Both the church and theology will have to struggle ever anew to find the appropriate answer.

only in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* that this becomes the theme of Christ and the world come of age. In this context, we encounter *discontinuity in continuity* in Bonhoeffer's understanding of religion. We discern continuity in his christological questions, and discontinuity with respect to his understanding of the world and of autonomy. In the *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer evaluates mature life and autonomy negatively as apostasy from God, while in the *Letters and Papers* he poses the question of Christ and a world come of age. In Tegel, the ethical alternative "Christ or an autonomous world" becomes the relation "Christ *and* the world come of age." Parallel to this discontinuity, the continuity in Bonhoeffer's initial christological question is maintained: *Christ and/or* life come of age.