



# **BONHOEFFER, THEOLOGY AND RELIGION – WHAT DO THEY TEACH US FOR A SOUTH-NORTH DIALOGUE?\***

## **BONHOEFFER, TEOLOGIA E RELIGIÃO – O QUE ELES NOS ENSINAM PARA UM DIÁLOGO NORTE-SUL?**

**Peter Frick**

Doutor pela McMaster University (Canadá). Professor no Departamento de Estudos de Religião da Universidade de Waterloo (Canadá) e membro da International Bonhoeffer Society.

E-mail: [pfrick@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:pfrick@uwaterloo.ca)

\* Este artigo foi inicialmente apresentado ao Programa de Pós-graduação em Ciências da Religião da Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, em São Paulo, Brasil, em maio de 2009.

---

## ABSTRACT

As the title of this essay indicates, this study engages four distinct themes, namely, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theology, religion and dialogue. Our task is not so much to examine each of these themes in detail, but to work out a matrix that allows each of the themes to have a specific and important place in a genuine conversation. Our main objective is thus the question of how Bonhoeffer, theology and religion fit together in a coherent and integrative dialogue among theologians of the south and north and by extension between east and west.

---

## KEYWORDS

Bonhoeffer; Theology; Religion; Dialogue; West.

---

## RESUMO

Como o título deste artigo indica, este estudo envolve quatro temas distintos, a saber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, teologia, religião e diálogo. Nossa tarefa não é examinar cada um desses temas em detalhes, mas a elaboração de uma matriz que permite a cada um dos temas ter um lugar específico e importante num contínuo diálogo. Nosso principal objetivo é, portanto, a questão de como Bonhoeffer, teologia e religião se encaixam num diálogo coerente e integrador entre os teólogos do Sul e do Norte, e, por extensão, entre Oriente e Ocidente.

Bonhoeffer; Teologia; Religião; Diálogo; Oriente.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

---

El lema es ahora otro mundo es posible, aunque no haya una palabra para designar este otro mundo, ni se hayan formulado estrategias de transformación: Todo es búsqueda (HINKELAMMERT, 2003, p. 1).

In July 1979, the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza was defeated in Managua by the Sandinistas. Ten years later in 1989, taking the world by surprise, the Berlin Wall crumbled unexpectedly and almost overnight. In the first half of the 1990s, the long awaited demise of Apartheid in South Africa became reality while in Eastern Europe one country after the other broke off the chains of decades of communism. In 2006, the peoples of Bolivia welcomed Evo Morales, the first indigenous president since the Spanish inquisition. In 2008, the American people voted for the African-American Democrat Barak Obama, thus effectively turning their backs on the capitalist terror of the Bush-Rumsfeld administration. Hand in hand, at about the same time, unfettered capitalism, Friedmanian style, showed its real face and cast the entire world into a near economic and financial apocalypse (KLEIN, 2008)<sup>1</sup>.

What does all of this have to do with theology? Everything – and more, as I will argue. For in these historic transformations we have precedents that large-scale political, social and economic changes are possible – both positive and negative. At the bottom of historic transformations lies always the deeply anchored hope, rendered here in the words that can often be heard in Latin America, that “un otro mundo es po-

---

<sup>1</sup> For a devastating critique of American imperialist capitalism, see Klein (2008).

sible.” (DEPARTAMENTO ECUMÉNICO DE INVESTIGACIONES, 2004)<sup>2</sup>.

As the title of this essay indicates, this study engages four distinct themes, namely, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theology, religion and dialogue. Our task is not so much to examine each of these themes in detail, but to work out a matrix that allows each of the themes to have a specific and important place in a genuine conversation. Our main objective is thus the question of how Bonhoeffer, theology and religion fit together in a coherent and integrative dialogue among theologians of the south and north and by extension between east and west. Since the chief objective is that of articulating a framework for such a dialogue, our discussion of Bonhoeffer, theology and religion focuses on the particular promise each of them brings to such a forum. Nonetheless, this study is a tentative endeavour predicated on the working hypothesis that Bonhoeffer, theology and religion each have a specific contribution to make to the south-north dialogue, a dialogue that is not only important but also necessary and possible. The key question addressed in this essay is why and to what extent these four aspects yield a promising basis for global theological dialogue aimed, ultimately, at the transformation of local and global communities.

---

## 2. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Why is Bonhoeffer – among the host of theologians – the one who can contribute the most in defining the contours of a wide-ranging theological dialogue? The answer, in short, is two-fold. On the one hand, there is Bonhoeffer’s biography, namely the journey from the height of Berlin’s aristocracy into the heart of Leviathan’s hell on the gallows of a concentration camp. On the other hand, there is the promise of his theology that sought to articulate a synthesis between the good news of Jesus Christ and the concrete reality of a secular

---

<sup>2</sup> As a representative view, Pablo Richard, *Fuerza ética y espiritual de la teología de la liberación. En el context actual de la globalización*. Richard asks that “si otro mundo es posible, ¿por qué no sera posible construir otro modelo de Iglesia?”.

and religionless life in Nazi Germany. In both instances – in biography and theology – the path began “from above” and ended up “below.”

Bonhoeffer’s biography is one of the best-known aspects of his life, in particular the fact that he resisted the Nazi regime, participated in the conspiracy on Hitler’s life and was hanged in the concentration camp Flossenbürg shortly before the end of the Second World War. As important as such an abbreviated sketch of his life may be, it masks the fact that his life has deep roots in the kind of theology he espoused.

Bonhoeffer’s life began in Berlin, where his father was a famous neurologist and the head of the university hospital Charité. Bonhoeffer lived in the Grunewald district of Berlin, a neighbourhood that included the homes and villas of the intellectual and economic elite of Berlin. Like himself, his brothers and brothers-in-law had received doctorates at a young age. For example, the doctoral supervisor of his brother Karl Friedrich at the University of Berlin was Walther Nernst, who was honoured as a Nobel laureate in chemistry while Karl Friedrich was his student. As a post-doctoral researcher, Karl Friedrich worked with Fritz Haber, Nobel Prize recipient in Chemistry in 1918 and one of the friends of Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize laureate in Physics in 1921. Intellectual elitism, cultural bourgeoisie and economic affluence were characteristic of the life of the Bonhoeffer family. Given this kind of a social context, the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was undoubtedly one of privilege and status. When the young Bonhoeffer finished his doctoral dissertation at the age of 21, he had achieved much, even by the standards of Berlin. The prism through which he looked at the world in 1928 was “from above.” Nevertheless, from now on, slowly but surely, his vantage point of the world was about to change and Bonhoeffer was drawn into these changes, not as a spectator, but progressively more as one of the actors.

## 2.1. THE MIDDLE: FALLING DEEPER

---

Bonhoeffer’s descent from his life “from above” to the suffering world “below” happened in various stages. Two such crucial stages in this journey were the experiences in Barcelona

and New York City. In 1928, Bonhoeffer went a year to Barcelona in order to be an assistant pastor to a German Lutheran congregation. On his way there, he visited a high mass in Paris that was attended by many prostitutes. Of that mass, these are the impressions of the freshly baked pastor:

[...] it was an enormously impressive picture, and once again one could see quite clearly how close, precisely through their fate and guilt, these most heavily burdened people are to the heart of the gospel (BONHOEFFER, 2008, p. 59).

Here we have one of the earliest utterances of Bonhoeffer's emerging social conscience. He speaks of the "most heavily burdened people", burdens often brought about by "fate and guilt". The number of burdened people in his life was to grow steadily. During the year in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer's eyes were opened to a reality of what he termed the "social question"<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly, Bonhoeffer's biographical encounter with the underside of social realities had as its correlative a re-conception of his theology. In an entry in his diary, he notes: "My theology is beginning to become humanistic; what does that mean? I wonder whether Barth ever lived abroad?" (BONHOEFFER, 2008, p. 64). Here Bonhoeffer gives us a glimpse into his theological formation. Prompted by his personal experiences of the "social question" he is thinking about theology in a new key. It is taking shape in a more "humanistic" fashion even though he does not quite know what that means. A first answer is given in one of his sermons. Bonhoeffer (2008, p. 529) proclaims:

Christians serve *their own time*, and that means they step into the midst of it with all its problems and difficulties, with its seriousness and distress, and there they serve. Christians are people of the present in the most profound sense. Be it *political* and *economic* problems, *moral* and *religious* decline, concern for the present generation of young people – everywhere the point is to enter into the problems of the present (emphasis mine).

---

<sup>3</sup> The social question emerged as Bonhoeffer witnessed both the extravagance of the German business community and social marginality. He encountered globetrotters, vagrants, escaped criminals, hired killers, legionnaires, circus people, dancers.

Bonhoeffer's admonition leaves no doubt: theology is not a mere abstract academic undertaking but must relate in a most concrete manner to the social realities of life.

In New York, we observe a subtle yet important terminological change in Bonhoeffer's characterization of social realities. Whereas in Barcelona he spoke in general terms of the "social question", now in New York, he speaks of the "social problem" (BOENHOEFFER, 2008, p. 307). Why this adaptation in expression? Without making too much of it, it is likely that Bonhoeffer's exposure to the social realities in Barcelona were still more coloured from his life "from above". While not denying that social issues did exist, the young Bonhoeffer still judged those somewhat disinterestedly, hence the expression "social question". A question does not *per se* imply an issue. In New York, however, Bonhoeffer took his sermon from Barcelona to heart, especially in his confrontation with racism (cf. FRICK, 2007, p. 135-151) in Harlem and the economic crisis in the United States. Racism and economics were not mere academic issues or neutral social realities. They were concrete social evils and problems. Now Bonhoeffer understood unmistakably: social realities imply tremendous issues, suffering, imbalances, dysfunction and destruction. What was at stake was not theology, but human lives; hence, theology must address these social issues in a manner that it supports and facilitates social transformations.

## 2.2. THE CONCLUSION: HERE BELOW

Bonhoeffer's return to the continent brought him eventually back to Berlin, via London and Finkenwalde. As the grip of Nazi evil became stronger and the atrocities against the Jews revealed themselves as a crime against humanity, Bonhoeffer's life "from above" became irrevocably shattered. His existence was now on a descent "from above" to the "below". The details of that downward spiral are well known and the stations do only be noted: involved in the conspiracy on Hitler's life, the arrest, various imprisonments, mock trial and murder at Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945, shortly before the end of the war.

In the middle of this journey “from above to below”, Bonhoeffer penned down the now famous recollection for his fellow-conspirators at New Year’s Eve 1943, entitled “After Ten Years”. Even though he had still not arrived at the bottom himself, Bonhoeffer (1971, p. 17) ponders: “We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer”.

---

## 3. THEOLOGY

---

### 3.1. THEOLOGY IN THE SOUTH

---

As you well know, many theologians of the South knew the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the time his works began to appear in print. Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988, p. 24, 42, 119, 227, 253), for example, engaged Bonhoeffer as early as his *A Theology of Liberation* and subsequently in his essay *The Limitations of Modern Theology: On a Letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (GUTIERREZ, 1983, p. 222-234). The same substantial engagement with Bonhoeffer we find in Jon Sobrinho (1976, p. 197, 221, 262,263, 274, 308), Leonardo Boff (1972, p. 2) and many others to this very day. In his essay on Bonhoeffer, for example, Gutiérrez (1983, p. 231) cites the same text from “After Ten Years” that we just cited above. “It would be unwarranted”, he comments,

[...] to attempt to deduce from Bonhoeffer’s use of terms such as ‘poor’ and ‘oppressed’ that we are in the presence of a critical analysis of modern society on grounds of that society’s injustice and oppression.

It seems to me that Gutiérrez is right in cautioning against using Bonhoeffer as model to construct a theology of social critique predicated on a person’s participation in an unjust and oppressive society. Even so, Gutiérrez (1983, p. 231) is also correct in recognizing that “there are weighty indications that Bonhoeffer had begun to move forward in the perspective of ‘those beneath’ – those on the ‘underside of history’”.



As we noted already, the young Bonhoeffer was on a journey to discover the formation of his “humanistic” theology. Bonhoeffer was fortunate to discover early in his career that any theology must be humanistic to some degree. For a theology that does not focus on the human condition in a substantial manner forfeits its relevance and may end up becoming a mere philosophy of life. In God’s story with the cosmos, human beings matter the most. Perhaps this is the reason why Gutiérrez (1971, p. 110) maintains that “we meet God in our encounter with others”. The other – or in biblical terminology, the neighbour – is the one who in our encounter receives agapeic love. But to give our agapeic love freely to the neighbour is neither an automatic nor an inevitable Christian act; it must be practiced – intentionally. In this regard, Gutiérrez (1971, p. 113) provides one of the most profound understanding of neighbour in his comments on the Good Samaritan:

The neighbour was the Samaritan who *approached* the wounded man and *made him his neighbour*. The neighbour, as has been said, is not the one whom I find in my path, but rather the one in whose path I place myself.

What does “the neighbour” mean with reference to a global theological dialogue? The answer, in short, is that theology must strive to articulate its doctrines in terms of the concreteness of the other, the neighbour. The difficulty lies not so much in incorporating the neighbour into a theological system as one of the various elements that together make up the cohesive structure of a particular theology. The difficulty, rather, lies in making the neighbour a crucial focal point of an entire theology. Again, the neighbour becomes not merely a focal point *in abstracto*, as the object or climax of theological thinking, but is central *in concreto* as the person created in the image of God. The other is not the content of my theology, but the recipient of my love (GREEN, 1998, p. 169)<sup>4</sup>. In Pauline language, theology must prompt the follower of Jesus

---

<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer (2008, p. 169) remarks: Christian love “*loves the real neighbor* [...] I do not love God in the ‘neighbor’, but I love the concrete You”.

Christ to carry one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). Alternatively, in the classical expression of liberation theology: Christian theology needs to push towards a preferential option for the poor, the neighbour, the other. However, what concretely does it mean to carry the neighbour's burdens?

---

## 3.2. THEOLOGY IN THE NORTH

---

When it comes to the theological understanding of the neighbour, I think that for the most part theologies that work within a framework of redemption and liberation are a good step ahead of theologies that – although mindful of, to use Bonhoeffer's expression, the "the social problem" – do not make social issues their starting point. This is the case for most theologies in European and North American contexts. What is at stake in this approach?

Although theologians of the North Atlantic have mostly focused on theology as a system of thought, as doctrine and as academic discipline, a few understood from the beginning that theology at its core has to play the role of social and political critique. One may think of the theological proposals of Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann<sup>5</sup>. However, exceptions notwithstanding, theologies in the northern hemisphere have failed in a major and irreconcilable way. As difficult as it may be for theologians of the north to admit this, their theologies have fallen short in addressing the economic implications of the vast gap between wealth and poverty. In other words, northern theologies failed to delineate a critique of structural wealth; not the wealth of the wealthy, but in particular the wealth of Christians. Such an appraisal is not simply a lofty disavowal of theology. It is, on the contrary, a timely wakeup call to correct what Jon Sobrinho (2004, p. 99) describes with utmost clarity:

---

<sup>5</sup> In his now famous open letter to Bonino, Moltmann (1976) initially challenged some of the assumptions of liberation theology. As the dialogue between continental and liberation theologians matured, Moltmann became favourably disposed toward the necessity of liberation theology.

The civilization of wealth *has failed as a way of guaranteeing the life* of the majorities because its “quality” of life cannot be universalized, given the universal correlation between resources and population; even if it could be universalized *it would not be desirable* to do so, because it has also failed as a *way of humanizing people and peoples*.

In other words, what Sobrinho asserts in general terms about the inequalities of a civilization controlled by wealth must be of prime concern for theologians of all stripes. The wide gap between poverty and wealth is not a mere neutral phenomenon or a natural part of our world order. This gap is horrendous not primarily because there are rich and poor persons, but because the existence of wealth implies an inescapable structural consequence, namely the dehumanization of the poor persons. Poverty is a sin not because money is evil, but because it destroys the humanity and dignity of human beings. In the words of Sobrinho (2004), wealth has failed as a *way of humanizing people and peoples*.

Let us return to Bonhoeffer for a moment. In one of the fragments in *Ethics* he writes:

There are, for example, certain economic or social attitudes and conditions that hinder faith in Jesus Christ, which means that they also destroy the essence of human beings and the world [*das Wesen des Menschen und der Welt*]. It can be asked, for example, whether capitalism, or socialism, or collectivism are such economic systems that hinder faith (BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 361).

Like Sobrinho, Bonhoeffer connects the economic structures of the world with humanity. Aside from the fact that economic conditions play a role in preparing the way of faith, the decisive point for both Sobrinho and Bonhoeffer is the correlation between economics and the essence of what it means to be a human being. While Bonhoeffer wonders in a more neutral tone whether capitalism, socialism or collectivism (communism) are most appropriate for human well-being, Sobrinho judges quite correctly that the social injustice brought about by the unequal distribution of wealth dehumanizes people. In other words, for Sobrinho the economic issue is not primarily a

question of what system fits the market, but what system brings about the greatest possible humanizing of the peoples of our planet. Sobrinho has thus opened a very crucial window for theology: theological reflection on questions of economics must be predicated not on the questions of the market and profits but on the humanizing effect of the market on the greatest good of human beings. Perhaps at the risk of oversimplification, the framing of the issue in these terms does not seem to favour an economic structure of unregulated market-capitalism. We will return to this issue below.

---

## 4. RELIGION

Religion, as distinct from theology, must play a part in the humanizing processes of the world. Yet Bonhoeffer, like Barth, was not very fond of religion and both, as is well known, critiqued religion frequently and rigorously. In a recent essay, Christiane Tietz examined Bonhoeffer's assessment of religion anew and offers the following succinct insights. She maintains that Bonhoeffer's arguments for the end of religion – and correspondingly, the arrival of a “religionless” Christianity – are not based on socio-religious reasons, but on *theological* ones. Fundamentally, Bonhoeffer asserts that the concept [Tietz calls it *die Sache*] of religion is juxtaposed to the core of the Christian faith and Bonhoeffer therefore de-couples religion and Christianity. He directs his critique against religion *within* Christianity in order to lay bare the potential *of* Christianity (TIETZ, 2006, p. 243-258).

Important as Bonhoeffer's theological critique of religion *vis-à-vis* religion may be, for the moment we are not concerned with religion from a theological perspective but from the socio-economic one. Because the phenomenon of religion is universal across all peoples, nations, languages and cultures, it follows that any global dialogue focussed on the transformation of an economically imbalanced and unjust society must reckon with the transformative power embedded in every religion. At the core, just as Bonhoeffer was discovering a “humanistic theology” religion must likewise seek to be a “humanistic religion”. This is easier said than done. As Juan Luis

Segundo has argued already in the 1970, the problem with popular religion, in other words, with the religious mass, is more of a psychological than a theological matter. The question at hand is how the religious masses are motivated for transformative social changes. Since it is the inscribed habit of the masses to follow without critical judgement, it is difficult to create an impulse for social transformation that is fully embraced within popular religion. Moreover, even when the mass of popular religion does embrace change, it is questionable whether the change stems from a deep religious conviction or is a mere reflection of the current *Zeitgeist*. Given these realities, Luis Segundo's (1976, p. 205) insights are still valid:

So we are left with a major issue that must still be explored. On the one hand we find *majority* lines of conduct that are quantitatively supreme; on the other hand we find *minority* lines of conduct that are qualitatively critical and decisive.

## 5. DIALOGUE AND TRANSFORMATION

---

Let us attempt to bring together Bonhoeffer, theology and religion in view of a fruitful dialogue that aims at a transformation of the human condition. In this section, I will very briefly sketch some ideas on the nature of dialogue and then, in the final section, delineate some of the prospects and limitations.

### 5.1. DIALOGUE

---

The essence of the human being is the ability to speak, to engage in rational conversation, to be in dialogue. In the dialectic of speaking and listening, a person participates in his/her own reality, namely the reality of "humanity". Without conversation, the very essence of humanity is limited and hindered to unfold its potential. Conversely, participation in dialogue is one form by which humanity comes to itself. If, then, dialogue is indeed one of the defining characteristics of huma-

nity, what is unique about a dialogue between Bonhoeffer, theology and religion? What does this conversation offer, what are its underlying assumptions, promises and limitations?

---

### 5.1.1. THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

Even though every conversation implies the risk of emptiness and meaninglessness, there is no potential for change, transformation and humanity's coming of age apart from the actuality of conversation. At the surface, this may seem trivial, but it is the beginning of transformation. Only when people, groups and nations enter into genuine dialogue does the possibility for change arise – not before. In other words, the starting point for transformation is genuine dialogue. But dialogue always involves at least two partners. As the opportunities arose, both Bonhoeffer and a host of Latin American theologians engaged in dialogue with ecumenical groups, ecclesiastical authorities, the academy, local congregations, base communities and social action groups.

---

### 5.1.2. THE PARTNERS IN DIALOGUE

Dialogue is typically not straightforward. The more complicated the subject matter, the higher the stakes and the higher the risk for failure. The success of dialogue is thus from the beginning tied to the partners in dialogue, their expectations regarding the outcome and their willingness to negotiate compromise solutions. In our context of attempting to establish a global theological dialogue, the structures of such a dialogue are notoriously complicated. The complexity lies in several, interdependent facts: theological dialogue aimed at social-economic transformation, frequently unequal partners in dialogue, conflicting analyses and understanding of the questions, issues and objectives. Theological dialogue that aims at economic issues – in particular the global imbalance between wealth and poverty – will inevitably encounter enormous resistance, critique and attempts to end such a dialogue.

On the practical level, theological dialogue must start as a local dialogue before it can grow into a global endeavour. The beginning of dialogue rests with each theological group. Theologians of the south must first engage in dialogue at the horizontal level; the same is true of North Atlantic theologies and theological dialogue in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Each of the local theological partners must first engage in work with each other. These sub-dialogues are critical in that they not only provide for the unique context, needs and promises of each region, but that they also set the stage for discerning larger patterns, similarities, differences etc. within the worldwide Christian communities and beyond.

## 5.2. TRANSFORMATION

---

Dialogue for the sake of conversation may have an intellectual, academic and even an enlightening side to it, but it does not automatically yield social transformations. The theological dialogue envisioned here is precisely, however, about social change.

### 5.2.1. SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

---

As any act of communication, theological dialogue is predicated on two assumptions. One, the state of the world with regard to economic justice is unacceptably wide, and two, the gap between wealthy and poor can be overcome and must be reduced. In other words, it is possible to create another world based on a more equitable distribution of the world's goods and resources. Precisely at this point lies a key factor in theological dialogue. It is decisive for the effectiveness of such dialogue to demonstrate that the global structures that undergird the reality of poverty and injustice are contingent upon economic, financial and political interests that can be changed and adapted; otherwise, the expression *un otro mundo es posible* becomes a mere mockery and illusionary thinking.

---

## 5.2.2. FROM WHAT TO WHAT?

If it is the case that structures of injustice can be modified, then the process of transformation requires comprehensive expert analysis, insights, tools and objectives. For example, the point of departure and the desired outcome in the process of transformation must be fully explicated, both on the micro and macro level. Since this analytic and constructive process lies at the heart of transformation and determines its success and failures, much energy and long-term efforts must be invested into the process.

---

## 5.3. HUMANITY

The goal of all transformative dialogue is the enhancement and well-being of humanity. All discussions, analyses, conferences, strategy and actions must ultimately demonstrate their intrinsic value *vis-à-vis* the good of the human race. As we briefly mentioned above, this key aspect has been emphasized by Bonhoeffer, Sobrinho and Gutiérrez in their reflections on the interplay between economic realities and humanity.

Theology's principal task is to articulate compellingly the intrinsic value of every person. That every person is created in the image of God entails, correspondingly to its inherent value, the basic provisions for life, such as food, water, decent housing, work and so on. In the context of his distinction between the ultimate and penultimate realities, Bonhoeffer connected the dignity of being human, life's conditions and the way of grace. Bonhoeffer (2008, p. 161) asserts that if "human life is deprived of the conditions that are part of being human, the justification of such a life by grace and faith is at least hindered". Therefore, Christian activism must be a "visible, creative activity on the greatest scale" that seeks to alleviate "human misery [...] human bondage [and] human poverty" (BONHOEFFER, 2008, p. 161).



## 6. CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS AND LIMITATIONS

---

If what I have said so far gives the impression as if theological dialogue is a simple and easy undertaking that will logically lead to the desired outcome, then let me now put into broader perspective the challenges that will predictably curtail the process of social transformation. Indeed, there are many ensuing issues, prospects and limitations, but I will only touch on some of them now. Any success in social transformation hinges on understanding the questions before anything else. The quality of the questions will determine the quality of the final answers. What are the questions?

### 6.1. RESISTANCE TO DIALOGUE AND TRANSFORMATION

---

It is all too human to resist change. This is a psychological phenomenon based on anxiety, perceived inability and the fear of failure and can be found in both individuals and groups. However, when the result of social transformation is considered, the resistance to change from psychological reasons can conceivably be overcome. More significant to the process of social transformation is the resistance that comes from those who have created the structures of oppression and who continue to hold the power over these structures. In real terms, these power holders (corporations, politicians, national elites) are the ones who will resist change to the greatest degree because they will be implicated in the transformed reality. They will have to give up and share power and this means the benefits that come with power monopolies.

Resistance to dialogue may also stem from hard-line theological and denominational positions. For example, it is often difficult enough as it is to engage diverse groups within Christianity to participate in dialogue. The reasons are typically theological and of such a nature that one group feels it cannot compromise their surely correct doctrinal or ethical po-

sitions. However, in the context of the dialogue envisioned here, the focus is not on a theological dialogue that challenges the theology of a particular group, church or denomination. It is, rather, on working together for the common good of all peoples. In this regard, there is a striking recollection in Moltmann's recent autobiography. He recounts a meeting in Lima with his "old friend" Gustavo Gutiérrez. "From Gustavo I heard the astonishing comment", says Moltmann (2008, p. 366),

[...] that his people work on the outskirts of the slums, the evangelical Pentecostal preachers go into the slums themselves. After that, the need to bring liberation theology and Pentecostal theology together in Latin America became increasingly important for me.

Moltmann's comments clearly suggest that theological dialogue must bridge the spectrum of theological positions, no matter how wide they should be. "Liberals" must listen to "conservatives" and vice-versa, Catholics to Protestants and so on<sup>6</sup>.

---

## 6.2. THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY

---

Arguably, as an academic discipline, theology is by nature more existential than many other disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. It is "more existential" to the degree that it seeks to bring about a specific and concrete change via the faith and conduct of Christians in the church. In that sense, to recall Barth's dictum, theology must always be in the service of the church.

But in addition to theology's task of coherent expression of the doctrines of the church, there must also be another vital function of theology. It is the responsibility of social critique, both within the Christian communities and outside of them within the larger, local and global social environment. In this regard, most theology has been rather timid. What is at stake? In short, it is the critique, in the words of Horkheimer (1968,

---

<sup>6</sup> A good example to bring radical evangelicalism to the table of theological dialogue is Caldas (2007).

p. 162), of “the present economic forms and the total culture based on them as the product of human labour” in a world controlled by capital. What Marx, the Frankfurt School and countless others have long argued is still the case today: the basic structure of our world is so trenchantly economic that all parts of life are inextricably in its grip. Moreover, the basic economic structures are such that the majority of the peoples of the world are disadvantaged by it while a minority is the beneficiary. In other words, the economic framework, the flow of capital and the practices of labour are the underlying issues that theology must address critically and existentially.

No doubt, many of the theological proposals of the south have clearly perceived this nexus between economics and the quality of life for the masses. But since the fall of the Berlin Wall, theologies of the south are faced with the challenge of re-conceiving the premises, processes and potential of their theological conceptions. Holding on to the *status quo* of a bygone era will no longer be enough. It is neither my right nor my task to enter into this discussion. There is already an enormous effort made in Latin America to sort out the issues being faced by virtually all theological proposals today. One such effort, among many others is that of Petrella (2005). As is evident in the studies edited by Petrella, there are indeed new issues that must be addressed within a re-conception of theology, such as the issues of diversity, sexism, machismo, racism, migration etc.

But if we are genuinely interested in transformative dialogue, then we must go beyond a re-conception of a theology of the south on its own terms. I am suggesting that the effectiveness, and perhaps even the survival, of theologies of the south is not a matter of only re-conceiving new theologies on their own contextual terms any more than the effectiveness of North Atlantic theologies is a matter for only North Atlantic theological proposals on their own terms. The South needs the North and the North needs the South. Why?

As Petrella’s (2005, p. 147) concluding essay of his edited work demonstrates, he is working on the assumption that the project of theologies of the south are “different from those produced in affluent Western Europe and the United States”. The crux of this statement and similar ones is not that the

theologies in the North are different from those in the South; this is so by virtue of the fact that every theology is contextual and historical. The issue at stake here is much more fundamental, namely the supposition that the theologies from the North and South are juxtaposed to one another and perceived as either entirely or partly incompatible. In other words, if the re-conception of the emerging identity of theologies of the South amounts to a flat rejection of European and American theologies, then the very attempt to engage diverse theologies in fruitful dialogue amounts to little more than empty rhetoric. This is not an issue peculiar to theologies of the South. The same applies to North Atlantic theologies and their rejection of any theology outside of their immediate contexts. Various theologies' rejection of each other raises of course a very serious issue: the question is whether distinct theologies must not, at some level, still be able to enter into dialogue with each other because of a unifying factor that makes them a theology – and not merely a world-view – in the first place. If so, what is the aspect that underlies all theologies without emptying their distinctive and contextual features and without imposing disguised new theologies of colonialism?

How can theologies of the South cooperate with European and American theologies? For an answer, let us return to Bonhoeffer. Although he was a rare exception, he modelled what must become more commonplace within theologies embedded in societies of privilege and wealth. More than any of his contemporaries Bonhoeffer modeled a kind of kenotic theology, a theology that moved from above to below. In concrete terms and in our postmodern context, the adaptation of this movement means the deliberate shifting of the wealth of the communities above to the neighbour below. This shifting must not be, however, the mere transfer of money and resources; if it is only that, then it amounts to no more than an economic act of goodwill. However valid such an act is in itself, the initiative must grow out of a theological *raison d'être* which becomes deeply entrenched in the soul of wealthy Christian communities. Put differently, Christian charity must be more than a church program. How can this happen in the North? Here we must once more come back to Gutiérrez and his insistence that as Christians we place ourselves deliberately in

the paths of our neighbours. Northern theologies must learn from Southern theologies to articulate their own kind of redemptive theology, namely a theology that unshackles from the enslavement of wealth and the hoarding of material securities. For better or worse, it is a fact that North Atlantic churches have colossal wealth that is directed toward its own programs. A genuine love of the neighbour – the one far away as much as the close by – implies a radical redistribution of the wealth of privileged Christians and communities. To be sure, any “anti-prosperity theology” aimed at wealthy Christians will not be popular and surely be resisted; it is nonetheless the hallmark of genuine discipleship. Such a path will unquestionably be a long and stony one, but one that theologians from the North and South need to embark on together. Here is one of the moments of genuine global theological dialogue.

### 6.3. COMPREHENSIVE DIALOGUE

---

How is it possible to accomplish genuine and long-lasting transformation because of theological dialogue? In short, the answer is that theological dialogue must be embedded in the larger global dialogue. With very few exceptions, theologians are not trained in economics, sociology, political science and related disciplines. Above we referred to Bonhoeffer’s questioning of capitalism, socialism and collectivism and whether such economic systems hinder faith. However, Bonhoeffer is sufficiently rooted in reality that he also realized theology’s limitations. He continues:

The church has a twofold approach here: on the one hand, it must declare as reprehensible, by the authority of the word of God, such economic attitudes or systems that clearly hinder faith in Christ, thereby drawing a negative boundary. On the other hand, it will not be able to make positive contributions to a new order on the authority of the word of God, but merely on the authority of responsible counsel by Christian experts (BONHOEFFER, 2008, p. 361).

The point is clear: the church and theologians are not universal experts trained to solve all the economic issues of the world. Whereas Bonhoeffer speaks of Christian experts, in the context of theological dialogue, it is advisable to draw also on the professional expertise of person irrespective of whether they are Christian or not.

For example, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is a sustained discussion of the question of the best global economic framework (cf. FUKUYAMA, 1992)<sup>7</sup>. After the collapse of communism, is socialism the best possible alternative. What about the thesis that globalization is economically inevitable and in the long-term the best possible. Where did this assumption originate, what are its premises, strength, weaknesses and alternatives? It will not so much be theologians who will address these and related questions in the fields of sociology, religious studies, philosophy, ethics, ecology, green energy, sexuality, psychology and so on, but they will need to be present to shape the questions, contexts and processes of this multidisciplinary undertaking.

---

## 6.4. IMMEDIATE BEGINNINGS

---

Finally, let me conclude by saying that every person interested in theological dialogue can become an agent of change – immediately. To work for the good of humanity does not require waiting for the right moment, important conferences, skilful diplomacy, the best possible education, effective church programs and so on. Every man and woman who confesses to be a follower of Jesus Christ can live out the immediate placing of oneself in the path of one's neighbour. Global transformation of the social conditions are indeed the utopia we will have to envision, but the reign of God begins here on earth by giving water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, hope to the hopeless and a word of grace and love to every person with whom we cross our paths.

---

<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama (2006a, 2006b) has since somewhat revised his view of “the end of history. For a discussion of Fukuyama and Bonhoeffer, see Schroeder (1994, p. 21-38).

## REFERENCES

---

BOFF, L. *Jesus Christ liberator: a critical christology for our time*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972.

BONHOEFFER, D. *Letters and papers from prison*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Ethics*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Works english*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

CALDAS, C. *Orlando Costas. Sua contribuição na história da teologia latino-americana*. São Paulo: Vida, 2007.

FRICK, P. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology: the case of racism. In: KOOP, K.; DOERKSEN, P.; BERGEN, J. (Ed.). *Creed and conscience*. Essays in honour of A. James Reimer. Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007.

FUKUYAMA, F. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *America at the crossroads: democracy, power, and the neoconservative legacy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006a.

\_\_\_\_\_. *After the Neocon: America at the crossroads*. London: Profile, 2006b.

GREEN, C. A theological study of the sociology of the Church. In: *Sanctorum Communio*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

GUTIÉRREZ, G. *A theology of liberation. History, politics and salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. The limitations of modern theology: on a letter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *The power of the poor in history*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A Theology of Liberation: history, politics, and salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

HINKELAMMERT, F. Pensar en alternativas: capitalismo, socialismo y la posibilidad de otro mundo. In: PIXLEY, J.

(Ed.). *Por un mundo otro*. Alternativas al mercado global. Quito: Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias, 2003.

HORKHEIMER, M. Traditionelle und kritische Theorie. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *Kritische Theorie*. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1968. v. 2.

KLEIN, N. *The shock doctrine*. The rise of disaster capitalism. Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2008.

MOLTMANN, J. An open letter to José Miguez Bonino. *Christianity and Crisis*, v. 29, n. 57, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *A broad place: an autobiography*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

PETRELLA, I. *Latin American Liberation Theology*. The next generation. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005.

SCHROEDER, S. The end of history and the New World Order. In: FLOYD JR., W. W.; MARSH, C. (Ed.). *Theology and the practice of responsibility*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994.

SEGUNDO LUIS, J. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976.

SOBRINHO J. *Christology at the crossroads*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Jesus the Liberator*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Where is God? Earthquakes, terrorism, barbarity, and hope*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004.

TIETZ, C. Unzeitgemäße Aktualität. Religionskritik in Zeiten der "Wiederkehr der Religion". In: DALFERTH, I. U.; GROSSHANS, H.-P. (Ed.). *Kritik der Religion, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 23*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006.