

## THEODICY AND THE CROSS IN THE THEOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER\*

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Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) is best known for his *Letters and Papers from Prison* and his death as a Christian martyr, how he understood theodicy has not been investigated with any depth.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this neglect might be that Bonhoeffer dealt astonishingly seldom in his writings with the vindication of God's justice and goodness regarding evil.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, as German Bonhoeffer scholar Sabine Damm argues, his writings offer "possible" solutions to the issue of theodicy,<sup>3</sup> and investigating such solutions is profitable since some aspects of his treatment of the

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<sup>1</sup>The bibliography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer lists only one work that considers his view of theodicy: Hubertus Halbfas, "Zwei Zeugen: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Reinhold Schneider zur Theodizee," *Religionsunterricht an höheren Schulen* 38 (1945): 224–35. See Ernst Feil, ed., *Internationale Bibliographie zu Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1998), 38. See also Wayne W. Floyd, *Bonhoeffer Bibliography: Primary Sources and Secondary Literature in English* (ed. Wayne W. Floyd Jr. and Clifford J. Green; Evanston, Ill.: American Theological Library Association, 1992). While Bonhoeffer scholarship deals with the topic of suffering, it pays little attention to Bonhoeffer's theodicy (Joachim Schwarz, "Leiden und Lernen. Ein systemtheoretischer Versuch zu Bonhoeffers Leidenstheologie," *EvT* 32 [1972]: 550–60). Daniel Liderbach focuses exclusively on Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering without any reference to theodicy ("Martin Luther's Theology of Suffering in Modern Translation: A Comparative Study in the Roots of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology of Suffering" [Th.D. diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1977]). Charles Marsh in his interpretation of Bonhoeffer deals passim with the theme of suffering in Bonhoeffer's thought (*Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 31, 91, 103, 132, 151, 155). William V. Johnson devotes one chapter of his work to Bonhoeffer's theodicy. According to Johnson, Bonhoeffer presents a "heuristic theodicy" ("Suffering in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Critical Analysis" [Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992], 211–50).

<sup>2</sup>Yet, it is well to acknowledge that Bonhoeffer was concerned with the question of theodicy, since in a few of his writings he mentions the *Theodizeefrage* or *Theodizeeproblem*.

<sup>3</sup>Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Introduction to His Thought* (trans. Thomas Rice; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 219–20.

problem of evil are barely touched upon in modern philosophical approaches to theodicy.<sup>4</sup> First, Bonhoeffer is not interested in providing a logical explanation of what evil is; rather, he approaches the problem of evil from the "christological centre of historic Christian faith."<sup>5</sup> Second, he stresses the *theologia crucis* and "divine suffering."<sup>6</sup> This essay will show that, in Bonhoeffer's view, theodicy is feasible only through the *theologia crucis*. While Bonhoeffer does not embrace one particular approach to theodicy,<sup>7</sup> he embraces a pragmatic method rather than a philosophical perspective in his discussion of the dilemma of evil.<sup>8</sup> He is interested in answering the question, "What does God do to overcome the evil and suffering that exist in this creation?"<sup>9</sup> I will be considering whether Bonhoeffer's answer makes a helpful contribution to the discussion of theodicy with respect to the Holocaust and to the church. As will become evident, his theodicy has some attractive aspects, but also some noticeable shortcomings.

The first part of this essay deals briefly with Bonhoeffer's methodology, for it is impossible to understand his theodicy without understanding his starting point in theology. The second part discusses some theological matters that are related to his theodicy, especially his doctrine of God and his Christology. The third part focuses on Bonhoeffer's theodicy. The fourth part considers his *Letters and Papers from Prison*,<sup>10</sup> showing how his earlier ideas on theodicy come to their fullest expression.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Richard Bauckham, "Theodicy from Ivan Karamazov to Moltmann," *Modern Theology* 4 (1987): 84.

<sup>5</sup>A similar approach to theodicy can be observed in Jürgen Moltmann's theology (see Bauckham, "Theodicy," 83, 84, 90). As is well known, Moltmann was influenced by Bonhoeffer. Moltmann notes that "every 'centre' has a surrounding area, otherwise it is not a centre. In 1951, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* led us out of our dilemma" (see Jürgen Moltmann, *How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology* [ed. Jürgen Moltmann; trans. John Bowden; Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997], 15).

<sup>6</sup>Bauckham, "Theodicy," 84, 90.

<sup>7</sup>This seems to be common among the neo-orthodox, especially Karl Barth. This is the position held by R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 133. Some theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann, link the atonement to what is known as a "practical theodicy," which implies not engaging as much with an "explanation of evil," yet offers a way to overcome suffering and evil. See Paul S. Fiddes, "Salvation" in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ed. John Bainbridge Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 192. Kenneth Surin shows that those who employ the "practical approach" to theodicy make similar arguments in their discussion (*Theology and the Problem of Evil* [New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986], 136–37).

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Surin, "Theodicy?" *HTR* 76 (1983): 233.

<sup>10</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. and trans. Eberhard Bethge; New York: Macmillan, 1953). Hereafter *LPP* with page numbers from the text.

<sup>11</sup>Regarding my method in this essay, given the continuity in Bonhoeffer's theological thought, I find it essential to associate his early thought with his mature thought. As John W. de Gruchy, Bonhoeffer scholar, argues, "While Bonhoeffer's reflections in prison indicated that he was in the process of breaking new ground in his theology, there is a remarkable continuity in his thought which can be discerned

## I. BONHOEFFER'S METHODOLOGY

The examination of theodicy in view of the reality of suffering—which in the last century was typified by Auschwitz—is discussed by Bonhoeffer in a way that is different from some traditional or modern theodicies.<sup>12</sup> Bonhoeffer sees no necessity to try to justify God in view of the presence of evil at Tegel (where he was imprisoned) and Auschwitz. This is best explained, I propose, by the fact that Christology is for Bonhoeffer the governing principle of theology.<sup>13</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, Christ is the “center” (*Mitte*), and all things must be understood from this center. The reality of God is found in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the Christology of Bonhoeffer makes unnecessary any justification of God in relation to the problem of evil. As Damm recognizes, the center of Bonhoeffer's theology is found in “Christ's death and resurrection.”<sup>15</sup> Like everything else, sin and evil are to be explained in terms of this center.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis in Bonhoeffer's theodicy is thus christocentric, in contrast to philosophical theodicies, which are anthropocentric, asking how God's dealings with humankind are just.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, he does not approach the question of theodicy from a rationalistic viewpoint. He refuses to consider the problem of evil without reference to the gospel, and that affects his theodicy.<sup>18</sup> In his theodicy, Bonhoeffer relates the problem of evil to the cross. Bonhoeffer is certainly not as optimistic as G. W. Leibniz, Teilhard

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from its early expression in *Sanctorum Communio* through to the *Ethics* and prison letters” (“Dietrich Bonhoeffer [1906–45],” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* [ed. Trevor A. Hart; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 81). Hence, in the fourth part of this essay, I pay attention to his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, which depicts some ideas he expressed on previous occasions. In contrast, John D. Godsey maintains that Bonhoeffer developed new ideas during his time in prison: “The new developments in Bonhoeffer's thinking during two years of imprisonment were disclosed in occasional letters to his close friend Eberhard Bethge” (“Theology from a Prison Cell,” *DrewG* 27/3 [1957]: 139).

<sup>12</sup>Bauckham, “Theodicy,” 83.

<sup>13</sup>This proposal refutes the thesis of David H. Hopper (*A Dissent on Bonhoeffer* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 145), who argues that anthropology, not Christology, is the governing principle in Bonhoeffer's thought. Bonhoeffer's controlling idea was that Christ is the center, not man. Christology plays a key role in Bonhoeffer's theology, and may well be said to be its starting point. Nonetheless, anthropology becomes especially important in his discussion of creation, the fall, and redemption. Unquestionably, anthropology is part of Bonhoeffer's theodicy, but it cannot be understood apart from his overarching Christology.

<sup>14</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Concerning the Christian Idea of God,” *JR* 12 (1932): 180; hereafter CCIG with page numbers from the text.

<sup>15</sup>Sabine Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Albert Camus: Analogien im Kontrast* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1998), 96.

<sup>16</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1958–1972), 5:147; henceforth GS with volume number and page numbers from the text.

<sup>17</sup>Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 133.

<sup>18</sup>Stephen Gottschalk, “Theodicy after Auschwitz and the Reality of God,” *USQR* 41/3–4 (1987): 81. While Stephen Gottschalk refers here to Barth, the same is true of Bonhoeffer.

de Chardin, or F. D. E. Schleiermacher, but he emphasizes that evil will be transformed into good—an idea that Barth appreciates as well.<sup>19</sup> Unquestionably, Bonhoeffer presents a “dialectical” solution to the problem of evil.<sup>20</sup>

What distinguishes Bonhoeffer from many modern theodicies is that he bases important aspects of his theodicy on Scripture and Luther’s theology.<sup>21</sup> To Bonhoeffer, “the Bible alone is the answer of all our questions.”<sup>22</sup> However, in the context of his own time, Bonhoeffer used the historical-critical approach to develop his understanding of Scripture. But in contrast to Adolf von Harnack and other scholars at that time, he used the entire corpus of Scripture in his discussion of evil.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer had some Hegelian tendencies.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, while the methodology of Bonhoeffer rests on a christological framework and Scripture, he was also occupied with the question “How God can be known?”

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<sup>19</sup>Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy*, 30–31.

<sup>20</sup>Gottschalk, “Theodicy after Auschwitz,” 81.

<sup>21</sup>While Bonhoeffer is a Lutheran, he also is a Barthian. Henri Blocher considers him a Lutheran Barthian or a “Barthian Lutheran.” Bonhoeffer accepts Barth’s christological approach, yet he does not reject the “antithesis of law and gospel,” or that of the hidden and revealed God. See Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (trans. David G. Preston; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 43–44.

<sup>22</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Die Antwort auf unsere Fragen: Gedanken zur Bibel* (ed. Manfred Weber; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2002), 5.

<sup>23</sup>In 1932 and 1933 the entire Protestant Church of Germany was affected by “the patriotic *Rassenideologie*” (“ideology of race”). Gottfried Class notes that “the movement *Deutsche Christen*” (“German Christians”) insisted that “the Jewish Old Testament” be excluded from the Christian faith, and “that only a Jesus free from all Jewish elements ought to be proclaimed.” In 1933 Reinhold Krause requested “a complete *Entjudung* of the church.” The OT became one of the most questioned writings in “world history.” See Gottfried Class, *Der verzweifelte Zugriff auf das Leben: Dietrich Bonhoeffers Sündenverständnis in Schöpfung und Fall* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner, 1994), 54–55.

<sup>24</sup>As André Dumas helpfully summarizes, Bonhoeffer’s Hegel is not too interested in characterizing the “logic of history” or thinking of the “spirit of an age”; rather, he portrays Hegel as a “logician and anti-Kantian” (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Theologian of Reality* [trans. Robert McAfee Brown; New York: Macmillan, 1968], 31). Bonhoeffer used Hegel’s “ontology” of everyday life as the established design for his “Christology, ecclesiology, and ethics” (Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 31).

## II. THEOLOGICAL MATTER RELATED TO THEODICY

A. The Doctrine of God <sup>25</sup>

In theology, especially with regard to theodicy, one of the most essential issues is the "reality of God." This has been even more evident after Auschwitz.<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer understood that the knowledge of God drastically changed after the fall. After the fall, humanity places itself in the center, glorifies itself as God, and cannot return to reality. "Reality," for Bonhoeffer, is really "transcendent" (CCIG 178-79). How can one know about this remote reality? For Bonhoeffer, neither religion nor metaphysical knowledge can be of service in approaching God. God's "revelation in history" denotes "revelation in hiddenness," whereas his "revelation in ideas" denotes "revelation in openness" (CCIG 182). The answer is found in Jesus Christ, who is God's self-revelation in history (CCIG 180).<sup>27</sup> God penetrates into history through Christ. "God himself dies and reveals himself in the death of a man, who is condemned as a sinner" (CCIG 184).<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer makes it clear in *Act and Being* that the *Anknüpfungspunkt* between God and men is "the cross."<sup>29</sup> The cross is the revelation of God only inasmuch as it is succeeded by

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<sup>25</sup>It is helpful here to recall that Bonhoeffer dealt with the Protestant inconsistency between the "transcendent immanence" (*finitum capax infiniti*) of Lutheranism and the "immanent transcendence" of Calvinism. The Lutheran idea would lead to Hegel's "absorption of God" and end up in "atheism" ("the Marxist interpretation of Bonhoeffer"); the Calvinist idea would end up with the "unknown" ("as the misinterpretations of nonreligiousness") (Erich Przywara, "Das katholische Kirchenprinzip," *Zwischen den Zeiten* [July 1929]: 277-302, cited by Martin E. Marty, "Introduction: Problems and Possibilities in Bonhoeffer's Thought" in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities of His Thought* [ed. Martin E. Marty; New York: Association, 1962], 21).

<sup>26</sup>See, for example, Elie Wiesel, who "has struggled with two irreconcilable realities—the reality of God and the reality of Auschwitz" (Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989], 54).

<sup>27</sup>In *Akt und Sein*, Bonhoeffer employs the theme of "act and being" as his "interpretation of reality," which he does not regard as metaphysical. Rather, he discovers "this reality in God's self-binding to the historical revelation in Jesus Christ; hence Bonhoeffer consistently has repudiated the preeminence of the category of 'possibility' in theology as rebirth of the nominalist *potentia Dei absoluta*" (Hans-Richard Reuter, Afterword to *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer [vol. 2 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*; ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr.; trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 165).

<sup>28</sup>Bonhoeffer is in agreement with Barth that all knowledge of God is revealed in Christ (James B. Gould, "Bonhoeffer and the False Dilemma of German Atheism," *TJT* 14/1 [1998]: 72).

<sup>29</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology* (vol. 2 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*; ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr.; trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 104; hereafter AB with page numbers from the text.

Christ's resurrection. "The resurrection of Christ" can be understood "only by faith"—God continues to be hidden (CCIG 185).<sup>30</sup>

Barth, more than Bonhoeffer, stresses the absolute "transcendence of God and the 'infinite qualitative difference' (Kierkegaard) between God and the world."<sup>31</sup> God's existence is *a se* in relation to himself and is not completely accessible to human beings.<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer wants to correct Barth's view of God. Barth's God, for Bonhoeffer, is always the God "who comes" and never "is there" (AB 85). Bonhoeffer's aim is to avoid a purely transcendental approach to God, where "God 'is' as *actus directus*. Act is always 'in reference to' transcendence" (AB 54).<sup>33</sup> Bonhoeffer does not deny the idea of a transcendent God; in fact, in one of his lectures he states that God is "absolutely transcendent" (CCIG 180).

Bonhoeffer insists that God cannot be known theoretically; he can be grasped only in his "worldly interactions." God, for Bonhoeffer, is always *in actu*.<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer concurs with Barth that God should be realized principally as "an act," and that it is unsound to apply attributes "of being to God."<sup>35</sup> As Richard Weikart has noted, Bonhoeffer's God is fundamentally free and possesses no immovable "essence," being known only in his actions and tangible "manifestations." God then becomes in some respect subject to modification.<sup>36</sup> Hence, as Jürgen Moltmann notes, Bonhoeffer denies

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<sup>30</sup>This statement shows that Bonhoeffer was following Luther's notion of *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. Bernhard Lohse points out that for Luther the "cross is visible to all, but that God is 'revealed' in it as the one who acts hiddenly under his opposite and creates life in death is recognizable only to faith" (Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* [trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 216).

<sup>31</sup>Gould, "Bonhoeffer," 73.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>According to Bonhoeffer, "the act" occurs in "consciousness," and therefore a distinction must be made "between direct consciousness (*actus directus*) and the consciousness of reflection (*actus reflexus*)" (AB 28). Bonhoeffer adopted the terms *actus directus* and *actus reflexus* from Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, yet connected them to the difference early Protestant theologians made "between *fides directa* (direct faith) and *fides reflexa* (reflexive faith)"; the Protestant theologians offer a theological understanding instead of a psychological meaning (AB 28 n. 17). See Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology* (trans. Robert E. Wallis; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867), 162, 413.

<sup>34</sup>Edward V. Theisen, "The Doctrine of God in the Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1973), 206. What is of special interest is that Bonhoeffer explains evil in the light of God's act. This means that God, with his acts, is in control of evil. He appeals here to the OT. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (ed. Eberhard Bethge et al.; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1986-), 15: 270-71; hereafter DBW with page numbers from the text.

<sup>35</sup>Richard Weikart, *The Myth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Is His Theology Evangelical?* (Bethesda, Md.: International Scholars, 1997), 65.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 66-67, 142. An evangelical interpreter of Bonhoeffer, George Huntemann, must also admit that "reality" is for him "understood processually" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment* [trans. Todd Huizinga; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 232).

"the eternal immutability of God."<sup>37</sup> During the years 1931–1933, he declared in a lecture that "God is not only the one who came, but he is always the one who comes anew." In other words, God is always becoming a "new truth" (*neue Wahrheit*) (GS 5:218, cf. Weikart, *The Myth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*). Bonhoeffer clearly moves away from the traditional doctrine of God, which stresses his immutability. Such a view of God, then, will lead to some untraditional notions of God in the context of suffering. This, doubtless, appears in Bonhoeffer's *Letters* and other writings.<sup>38</sup>

So, then, it is not surprising that Bonhoeffer attempts to understand the doctrine of God afresh in the context of his own time.<sup>39</sup> One important aspect of Bonhoeffer's doctrine of God is the idea of the powerlessness and suffering of God. According to Bonhoeffer, human beings can encounter God and find hope at "the Cross of Jesus Christ, the cross of the suffering love of God" (GS 1:66). Similarly, in one of his letters to the Leibholz family in 1942, Bonhoeffer declares that he is convinced of the suffering of God:

There are so many experiences and disappointments that drive sensitive people toward nihilism and resignation. That is why it is good to learn early that suffering and God are not contradictions, but rather a necessary unity. For me, the idea that it is really God who suffers has always been one of the most persuasive teachings of Christianity. I believe that God is closer to suffering than to happiness, and that finding God in this way brings peace and repose and a strong, courageous heart. (MC 46)

Here, then, Bonhoeffer suggests that through God's sufferings humanity receives strength—but, paradoxically, not from a strong God, but from a weak God. These may be novel ideas in his *Letters*; they developed more during his Tegel imprisonment.<sup>40</sup> After having noted that humanity finds God at the cross, we can now consider Bonhoeffer's Christology.

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<sup>37</sup>See Jürgen Moltmann and Jürgen Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* (trans. Reginald H. Fuller and Ilse Fuller; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 52.

<sup>38</sup>Barth states, "The Bible does not support the view that God is God in the same way at all times" (Karl Barth, cited by Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* [trans. John Bowden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 114).

<sup>39</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditations on the Cross*. (ed. Manfred Weber; trans. Douglas W. Stott; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 6; hereafter MC with page numbers from the text.

<sup>40</sup>Daniel Liderbach ("Martin Luther's Theology of Suffering," 106) argues that this "theology of suffering" is mainly part of his later theology (*Ethics and Letters and Papers from Prison*). Liderbach's view, however, must be nuanced.

*B. Christology—Christ as Center*<sup>41</sup>

The events in Germany required Bonhoeffer to make a clear statement of Christology.<sup>42</sup> And his views on Christology in 1933 were not invalidated by his later statements.<sup>43</sup> The solution for him to every theological problem centers on Christ.<sup>44</sup> Christology is for him the discipline *par excellence*, standing alone at the “centre” of theology.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is from the standpoint of Christology that Bonhoeffer explains evil. As he understands the fall, humanity cannot return to their original condition; humanity lost their original freedom, which can be regained only through Christ’s redeeming work. Christ becomes a “new creature.” In the light of his new creation, all other creatures are “old creatures” (DBW 12:310–11).<sup>46</sup>

Christ himself, according to Bonhoeffer, becomes “the new center” that was lost through the fall. This means that Christ, as the

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<sup>41</sup>Scholars have not reached a consensus on Bonhoeffer’s Christology. In recent research, while Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann examine the philosophical influences on Bonhoeffer’s thought, they claim that any interpretation of Bonhoeffer “has to recognize the centrality of Christology in his thinking. Overlooking this defining theological commitment in Bonhoeffer constitutes the cardinal error of the radical theologians of the 1960s” (*Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009], 17). For Heinrich Ott (*Wirklichkeit und Glaube*, vol. 1, *Zum theologischen Erbe Dietrich Bonhoeffers* [Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 149), Bonhoeffer aimed to develop “Christology as ontology of all reality.” He suggests that Bonhoeffer presents “an existential Christology.” To communicate the gospel means to provide the evidence of Christ in every situation. Rainer Mayer is of the view that since Bonhoeffer tried to understand all reality from the standpoint of Christ, he presents a “Christomonism.” In the *Letters* the reality of the world becomes the reality of Christ, insofar as God through Christ is all in all. Mayer asserts that Bonhoeffer strives to unite “heterogeneous elements” in his system of “christological ontology” (*Christuswirklichkeit: Grundlagen, Entwicklung und Konsequenzen der Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* [Arbeiten zur Theologie 2/15; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1969], 83). There is in some sense a notion of “Christomonism” in Bonhoeffer’s theology, where it appears that Christ functions as the *principium quo*, where all things find their solution. This will become evident when we examine Bonhoeffer’s theodicy.

<sup>42</sup>Edwin H. Robertson, Introduction to *Christ the Center*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (trans. John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 20. Bonhoeffer gave these lectures in May–July 1933. At the beginning of that year, Adolf Hitler had been named chancellor of Germany. It is important to consider these lectures in order to avoid thinking of Bonhoeffer as the “apostle of the ‘dying church’ or as the advocate of ‘religionless Christianity.’ The paradox of the catchphrases can only be resolved by the study of his Christology” (ibid., 22).

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>44</sup>Hans-Jürgen Abromeit, *Das Geheimnis Christi: Dietrich Bonhoeffers erfahrungsbezogene Christologie* (Neukirchner Beiträge zur systematischen Theologie 8; Neukirchen: Neukirchner, 1991), 16. There is consensus among Bonhoeffer scholars that his “theological work is through and through christologically orientated” (Robertson, Introduction to *Christ the Center*, 11. Cf. Hopper, *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer*, 29).

<sup>45</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (trans. John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 28; hereafter CC with page numbers from the text.

<sup>46</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who Is Christ for Us?* (ed. and trans. Craig Nessel and Renate Wind; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 59; hereafter WC with page numbers in the body of the text.



center, functions as the mediator of the fallen creature; he is the one who fulfills the law and provides redemption from this bondage for all human beings. Christ takes our place before God, which indicates the end of the "old and fallen, and the beginning of the new world of God" (WC 60; DBW 12:310–11). Christ is at once the "boundary and my rediscovered centre" (CC 62). Only in Christ does one discover his "new centre." Christ's presence is found in "the Word," "the sacrament," and "the community"; he is "in the centre of human existence, history and nature" (CC 62). Christ is present where history in its entirety ought to abide before God. Christ is found to be *pro me* even in history. The church is the centre of history because Christ's presence is found there after his death and resurrection. The church is a "hidden centre" in this world (CC 65, 66).

Someone who sees Jesus Christ observes simultaneously not only God, but the world as well. The world can only be seen with God, and vice versa. The God-man stepped "between God and the world," and thus becomes "the center" (*Mittelpunkt*) of everything.<sup>47</sup> In Jesus Christ, humanity finds God. Bonhoeffer stresses that this one "God-man is the starting point of Christology" (CC 46). Having observed the centrality of Christology in Bonhoeffer's theology, we are at the point where we can consider his theodicy.

### III. BONHOEFFER'S THEODICY

#### A. *The Enigma of Malum*

Early on in his theological development, Bonhoeffer made it clear that he was not interested in formulating a logical explanation of theodicy.<sup>48</sup> And for him, there was no way to solve the problem of theodicy on philosophical grounds (DBW 6:178). Following Luther, Bonhoeffer realized that philosophy cannot provide a rational solution to the problem of evil.<sup>49</sup> The solution is found neither in human nor in rational explanations; it must be found elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer remained faithful to this basic commitment.

Bonhoeffer, then, resists asking "why" there is evil in this world. This is not a question that a theologian should address. If we could answer this question, we would become sinless, since man could then make something other than himself responsible for evil. Already Tertullian considered the question "*unde malum*" as

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<sup>47</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 74–75.

<sup>48</sup>"Das Problem einer Theodizee, das sich hier ankündigt, kann erst an späterer Stelle zur Lösung gebracht werden" (DBW 6:178).

<sup>49</sup>Luther had already rejected the whole notion of a "philosophical theodicy on fideistic grounds" (Leroy E. Loemker, "Theodicy," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* [ed. Philip P. Wiener; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973–1974], 4:381).

<sup>50</sup>Similarly, Barth declared that evil could not be explained (Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Barth on Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 13 [1996]: 584).

heretical, since it leads naturally "to the question *unde deus*."<sup>51</sup> The question of why there is evil, for Bonhoeffer, can only be answered by stressing that humanity is completely responsible for it.<sup>52</sup>

It would be misleading to maintain that Bonhoeffer was not interested in theodicy, for although he was not interested in giving a logical explanation for the problem of evil, in several different writings he does spell out his solution to the problem of evil. In his lecture on "Homiletische Übungen" (1935), he states that there is no need to justify God's righteousness. Instead of justifying God, Bonhoeffer, even more than Barth, stresses the justification of humankind. Bonhoeffer can make this assertion because of his loyalty to Luther's legacy. On the cross, God defended his righteousness. Therefore, the proper response to the question of theodicy is found on the cross. There one realizes that God "alone is righteous" (DBW 14:326).<sup>53</sup> This is the key to Bonhoeffer's theodicy. "God's righteousness" is the basis for "the forgiveness of sin" (DBW 14:367). What mattered most to Bonhoeffer was the message of the cross in all evil.

### B. Malum and Theologia Crucis

Bonhoeffer remained faithful to providing a theodicy that was based on a christological ontology. This becomes clear in his lecture on World War I, where he proposed a reply to the question, "How could God allow this suffering and evil?" In Bonhoeffer's view God could allow all that suffering and evil because of "the message of the cross of Christ" ("die Predigt vom Kreuz Christi") (DBW 14:765). This idea, that what really matters in the midst of evil is the cross, conveys the heart of Bonhoeffer's theodicy. Thus what matters in war is not "victory or defeat" but rather that the message of Christ is realized in all suffering and evil (DBW 14:766). Bonhoeffer expresses Barth's view when he argues that "[i]n Christ death and evil and sin are overcome by an act of God visible for faith; and at the end of everything God will show power over death and sin to everybody. He will solve this problem of death and evil and sin by an act of his power" (DBW 10:449).

Bonhoeffer also focuses on the idea that with the death of Christ the highest form of suffering is attained. The God-man was murdered (DBW 10:354-55). On the cross Christ associated himself with those who suffer. Hence, only the cross can give meaning to the

<sup>51</sup>Peter Koslowski, "Der leidende Gott," in *Theodizee—Gott vor Gericht?* (ed. Willi Oelmüller; Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1990), 38.

<sup>52</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Schöpfung und Fall: Theologische Auslegung von Genesis 1 bis 3* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1955), 97; hereafter SF with page numbers from the text.

<sup>53</sup>"Gott führt am Kreuz den Selbstbeweis seiner Gerechtigkeit. Indem im Glauben an den Gekreuzigten anerkannt wird 'Gott allein hat recht,' werden wir gerecht; nicht von unserem Recht-haben wird geredet. Ziel: Die Selbstrechtfertigung Gottes; hier wird weniger von der Rechtfertigung der Menschen, geredet. Das Theodizeeproblem im Kreuz gelöst" (DBW 14:326).

question of theodicy, for there God through Christ experienced all suffering.<sup>54</sup> Already as a young theologian Bonhoeffer had reflected on the words, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He concluded that God's love stands behind this utterance and that the meaning of the cross is that it shows humanity the way back to God (GS 5:153–54).

Bonhoeffer's doctrine of God suggests that in the cross God depicts himself as acting against evil. "The Holy One goes into a world alienated from God to bring sinners home."<sup>55</sup> Since Christ has risen, he has attacked the authority of the Evil One. Yet no one in the world is able to notice this. Simply in the church is Christ known as *Christus Victor*.<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer articulated the motif of *Christus Victor* in relation to theodicy as well as to the suffering of God, to which we will turn now.

### C. The Suffering of God

In 1934, Bonhoeffer declared in a sermon that suffering is holy, since God himself endures sufferings in this world through human beings. The main idea is that

God suffered on the cross. Therefore all human suffering and weakness is a sharing in God's own suffering and weakness in the world. We are suffering! God is suffering much more. Our God is a suffering God. Suffering forms man into the image of God. The suffering man is in the likeness of God. . . . Whenever a man is in a position of weakness—physical or social or moral or religious weakness—he is aware of his existence with God and his likeness to God, he shares God's life, he feels that God is with him, he is open to God's thoughts, that is to God's grace, God's love, God's comfort which passeth all understanding and all human scale of value. (GS 4:182)

Bonhoeffer here proposes that suffering in itself possesses positive virtue. He can even say that human beings participate in God's suffering. There is comfort in the fact that God himself is a suffering God. In the light of God's sufferings, individual differences such as social status fade away, and all human beings realize their common identity with others (GS 1:66). Even more, we will see in Bonhoeffer's *Letters* that individual suffering puts God, in spite of his transcendence, in the middle of that suffering.<sup>57</sup>

Within his own theological system, though Bonhoeffer cannot define evil or explain its origin, he can explain how evil was

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<sup>54</sup>Johnson, "Suffering in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 229.

<sup>55</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936* (ed. Edwin Robertson; trans. Edwin Robertson and John Bowden; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 146–47.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>57</sup>Johnson, "Suffering in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 157.

conquered, namely by Christ, through the cross. Here, then, Bonhoeffer calls attention to the possibility of theodicy. Therefore, a justification of God is not necessary, but rather a justification of humankind. Bonhoeffer clearly distances himself here from the traditional and modern approach to theodicy. His main concern is how a fallen world can be reconciled (SF 97). Elsewhere in *Schöpfung und Fall*, Bonhoeffer makes it clear that the whole history of creation, including the fall, is to be perceived exclusively from the standpoint of Christ, since he is the "beginning, the new and the end of this world" (SF 7). Having said this, Bonhoeffer solves the problem of theodicy indirectly in the context of the fall. Thus, aspects of his theodicy can be derived from his interpretation of the biblical account of the fall.

#### D. The Fall and the Theologia Crucis

The fall is an important aspect of Bonhoeffer's notion of the problem of evil. Scripture itself does not set forth a rational argument of theodicy, where God's character is defended despite the existence of evil, yet it clearly reveals that there is a close link between "the fall of humankind" and the manifestation of suffering and evil.<sup>58</sup> In the biblical account of creation and the fall, the destruction of creation and the present evil and suffering are understood in relation to sin and guilt.<sup>59</sup> Bonhoeffer's theodicy moves along the lines of this approach. Therefore, it is necessary to consider Bonhoeffer's thought on the relationship of moral evil to sin, and how this fits in with his "christological theodicy."<sup>60</sup> His understanding of the fall is especially set forth in "Schöpfung und Sünde" (1932–1933). Bonhoeffer's interest in anthropology and the fall is indicated by the fact that he devoted a whole lecture series to this subject—"Schöpfung und Sünde."<sup>61</sup> As in his previous studies, Bonhoeffer does not end his discussion with anthropology, but is led again to a "christological concentration"—a move from the "boundary at the margin" to the "boundary at the center."<sup>62</sup>

One of Bonhoeffer's solutions to theodicy appears in his discussion of the fall that points directly to the cross. God has to deal differently with his fallen creation. While Adam's life is headed

<sup>58</sup>R. F. Hurdling, "Suffering," in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (ed. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 823.

<sup>59</sup>W. Trillhaus, "Theodizee. II Dogmengeschichte," in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (3d. ed.; ed. Kurt Galling; vol. 6; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1962), 740.

<sup>60</sup>G. C. Berkouwer refers to "the christological theodicy" of Karl Barth (*The Providence of God* [2d. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961], 241).

<sup>61</sup>Bonhoeffer's lectures provide evidence of his early method of "biblical exegesis," which resulted from "the new role" that the Bible played in his thought. See Clifford J. Green, *The Sociality of Christ and Humanity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Early Theology 1927-1933* (AARDS 6; ed. H. Ganse Little Jr.; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1972), 236.

<sup>62</sup>Reuter, Afterword to *Act and Being*, by Bonhoeffer, 179.

"towards death," the Christian's life "is directed towards Christ" (SF 113).<sup>63</sup> Then Cain as the human being *sicut deus* "becomes a murderer" because he hates God (CF 95). Bonhoeffer, as observed, mentions in the context of Cain that

Christ on the Cross, the murdered Son of God, is the end of the story of Cain, and thus the actual end of the story. . . . The stem of the cross becomes the staff of life, and in the midst of the world life is set up anew upon the cursed ground. (CF 95)

This leads us to discuss further the fall and the theology of the cross.

For Bonhoeffer, the only solution for humankind after the fall is for God to deal with humanity "in Jesus Christ, in the cross" (CF 74). Through Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, humanity becomes new again (MC 54). By employing Luther's *theologia crucis*, Bonhoeffer finds a paradox in the cross—"the tree of life," on which "God himself must suffer and die," also brings about the "kingdom of life and of Resurrection given again by God in grace." The cross, for Bonhoeffer, is a different paradise that occasions a reversal of humanity's present dilemma. In his own words, "The tree of life, the Cross of Christ, the middle of the fallen and preserved world of God, for us that is the end of the story of paradise" (CF 96).

It is evident from Bonhoeffer's views on creation, fall, and redemption, that he used the motif of the fall in order to reveal in it the root of sin and evil and that he pointed to the cross as the solution to that sin and evil. For Bonhoeffer, the fall explains "the origin of evil."<sup>64</sup> Most important, Bonhoeffer points to Jesus Christ and his work as the heart of true theodicy. To be sure, Bonhoeffer's theodicy is not "anthropodicy," but rather "christodicy."<sup>65</sup> For Bonhoeffer, Christ is the key to theodicy.

#### IV. LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON (1943–1945)

##### A. Who Is Christ Today? And Who Is God Today?

It remains for us to consider Bonhoeffer's ideas on theodicy in his final writings. A careful examination of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* reveals that to the end he remained committed to some of his core ideas related to the problem of evil. In the *Letters* the idea of *theologia crucis* is stressed "more than before."<sup>66</sup> The question that Bonhoeffer already raised in his lecture on Christology, namely,

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<sup>63</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1–3* (trans. John C. Fletcher; London: SCM, 1959), 91; hereafter CF with page numbers from the text.

<sup>64</sup>Koslowski, "Der leidende Gott," 38.

<sup>65</sup>Johnson, "Suffering in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 232.

<sup>66</sup>Clifford J. Green, "Human Sociality and Christian Community," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (ed. John W. de Gruchy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129.

"Who is Christ?" becomes pertinent again and more urgent. The question "Who are you today?" shows that Bonhoeffer is interested in reaching a completely christological solution with his past methodology, and that he is interested in a novel christological solution.<sup>67</sup> Paul Tillich and other theologians were aware of the "evolution of secularization" in the modern world. But they could not hold to a "Christology of the Reformation" as did Bonhoeffer, who "proclaimed the coming of age in the name of the crucified and risen Christ."<sup>68</sup>

On August 21, 1944, Bonhoeffer once again asserted that the solution to all things is found in Christ. All that human beings expect and request from God is found only in Christ. Bonhoeffer was sure that

Our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death; it is certain that in all this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand. (LPP 214)

What is striking is that for Bonhoeffer all depends on Christ and not on God.<sup>69</sup>

Bonhoeffer's concern to go beyond "metaphysical" notions of God guided him to make doubtful statements about God. He never adopted a view like those of the "death of God theologians," but he also failed to embrace a "traditional" doctrine of God.<sup>70</sup> This again is best seen in his *Letters*. Bonhoeffer did not ask, "Where is God in Tegel or Auschwitz?" Rather, he asked, "Who is God?"

Not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc. That is not a genuine experience of God, but a partial extension of the world. Encounter with Jesus Christ. The experience that a transformation of all human life is given in the fact that "Jesus is there only for others." His "being there for others" is the experience of transcendence. It is only this "being there for others," maintained till death, that is the ground of his omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. (LPP 209-10)

The real experience is found in the reality, not that "Jesus is *pro me*," but that "Jesus is there only for others."<sup>71</sup> This, then, seems to be a new element in Bonhoeffer's theodicy: The relationship with God as

<sup>67</sup>Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary* (trans. Erich Mosbacher; New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 769.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>69</sup>As Gerhard Ebeling reminds us, in modern theology the second person of the Trinity often receives priority over God (*Theologie und Verkündigung: Ein Gespräch mit Rudolf Bultmann* [2d. ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1963], 21-25).

<sup>70</sup>Weikart, *The Myth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 142.

<sup>71</sup>Larry L. Rasmussen notes that the idea of "being-for-others" possesses an "ontological ground" for Bonhoeffer. To understand Christ in a different manner would be "godless" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* [Studies in Christian Ethics Series; New York: Abingdon, 1972], 18-19).

"new life" is expressed in "existence for others" through our being in Christ. In this new relationship with God, humankind lives for others (LPP 210). The real church is found where "it exists for others" (LPP 211).

### *B. The Powerlessness and Suffering of God: Christ as Center*

The question for Bonhoeffer at the prison in Tegel was "not how to find the graciousness of God whose reality is self-evident and unquestioned, but whether there is a credible reality of God at all."<sup>72</sup> Why does God permit evil in this world? A God that is powerless in the presence of suffering appears to be less than God. But it is exactly the trust in God's omnipotence that leads human beings who suffer into doubts.<sup>73</sup> So, then, Bonhoeffer found in the powerlessness of God a solution to the problem of evil.<sup>74</sup>

For Bonhoeffer, "the reality of God indeed is where the reality of the world is."<sup>75</sup> That is, God adapts himself to the new reality of Auschwitz. Bonhoeffer expresses in his famous letter of July 1944 the view that only in the powerless God is help found. "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross" (LPP 196). In other words, in all this present suffering God becomes "weak and powerless" in this world, and this is how he can provide help for us.<sup>76</sup> With respect to theodicy, God's pain brings healing to humankind's pain in all its suffering.<sup>77</sup> For Bonhoeffer, "the question of the why of suffering" is "reversed and dismissed through God's suffering in this world; for him the cross is *signum* of the powerlessness of God and the defeat of God's suffering."<sup>78</sup> Bonhoeffer continues to stress that only the suffering God is able to help. It seems as though theodicy finally becomes "*theophany*"—God is not a destructive force and must be a "co-sufferer."<sup>79</sup> Here, to be sure, Bonhoeffer's view of the suffering God turns into an apologetic

<sup>72</sup>Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 24.

<sup>73</sup>Huntemann, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 157.

<sup>74</sup>John Phillips (*Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* [New York: Harper & Row, 1967], 185–86) is of the opinion that Bonhoeffer's notion of "this-worldly transcendence" shows that he rejected "the traditional doctrine of God." To be sure, this rejection of the traditional God was already present in his earlier theology.

<sup>75</sup>Theisen, "The Doctrine of God," 206. Bonhoeffer clearly cannot here maintain the orthodox doctrine of the immutability of God; rather, God "can be translated into sociological terms as the faithfulness of God in history" (Jürgen Moltmann and Jürgen Weissbach, *Two Studies in the Theology of Bonhoeffer* [trans. Reginald H. Fuller and Ilse Fuller; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967], 52).

<sup>76</sup>It is helpful here to recall that, according to Hegel, God embraces pain but does not suffer pain. See Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond: John Knox, 1958), 28.

<sup>77</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 47. Moltmann cites here from Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*.

<sup>78</sup>Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Albert Camus*, 95.

<sup>79</sup>Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil*, 118.

for God for a suffering world.<sup>80</sup> This is similar to the view of Moltmann, who, influenced by Elie Wiesel, wrote, "God himself hung on the gallows. . . . If that is taken seriously, it must be also said that, like the cross of Christ, even Auschwitz is in God himself. Even Auschwitz is taken up in the grief of the Father."<sup>81</sup> Bonhoeffer, like Moltmann, does not justify Auschwitz in this way, but directs attention to the cross as being where God makes himself history.<sup>82</sup> Once again, the *theologia crucis* is Bonhoeffer's solution to the problem of theodicy.

As in his early theology, Bonhoeffer considers the relation between God and the problem of suffering, and its solution, which is found in Jesus Christ. So clear is that statement that it deserves direct and full quotation:

We are to find God in what we know, not in what we do not know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved. That is true of relationship between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the wider human problems of death, suffering, and guilt. It is now possible to find, even for these questions, human answers that take no account whatever of God. In point of fact, people deal with these questions without God, and it is simply not true to say that only Christianity has the answers that are just as unconvincing—or convincing—as any others. Here again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognized at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognized in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life, and he certainly did not "come" to answer our unsolved problems. From the centre of life certain questions, and their answers, were seen to be wholly irrelevant (I am thinking of the judgment pronounced of Job's friends). In Christ there are no "Christian problems." (LPP 174–75)

This is an important text because it shows that Bonhoeffer remained faithful to his earlier position that God is discovered in Christ. Here again Bonhoeffer does not try to find a rational answer to the problem of suffering and evil, but maintains in his mature thought the idea that Christ is the center of all life; through him all suffering and evil is explained. Bonhoeffer remained faithful to what he had expressed in his lectures on Christology in 1933. Repeatedly he wondered during these difficult times whether it was rewarding to continue to live. Bonhoeffer claims that because of Christ and his life, our life finds meaning in the midst of the most horrible evil (WC 78;

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<sup>80</sup>Johnson, "Suffering in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 247. Johnson argues that Bonhoeffer runs the risk of doing this kind of "apologetic for God" because he does not deal with the issue of "divine possibility" (ibid.).

<sup>81</sup>Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 278.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.



DBW 8:572–73). Again it is important to notice that Bonhoeffer does not mention God, but only Christ.

### C. *The Problem of Malum*

What does Bonhoeffer have to say about evil in his *Letters*? In his *Letters* Bonhoeffer returns to the problem of evil, where he links it with ethics. Bonhoeffer does not change his basic position on evil, but his idea of evil becomes in some respects more realistic. Being now personally confronted with evil in a prison cell (death cell), Bonhoeffer believes that the great evil of his day turns all ethical notions into chaos (LPP 26).

Already in his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer had affirmed that the moral deficiency of human nature is most revealed in times of sufferings (MC 49).

For evil to appear disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice is quite bewildering to anyone brought up on our traditional ethical concepts, while for the Christian who bases his life on the Bible it merely confirms the fundamental wickedness of evil. (LPP 26)

Here, then, Bonhoeffer rejects considering suffering and evil as “abstract principles.” If suffering is viewed only abstractly, it is deprived of its aspect of “contingency on a divine providence.” Sufferings and blessings are not paradoxical (LPP 205).

In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer suggests as before that God can bring “good out of evil” (LPP 29). In making this statement, he has his own historical context in mind. Obviously, God can bring good out of the evil of the Nazis. According to Bonhoeffer, not only can God bring “good out of evil,” but he chooses to do so, and “even out of the greatest evil” (LPP 34). What becomes clear here is that the greater-good argument is still part of Bonhoeffer’s theodicy. If Bonhoeffer’s theodicy suggested that the practical end in view is that humanity’s failings are directed toward good (LPP 34), it also suggested that humanity ought to share in God’s sufferings. On July 18, 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote the well-known poem “Christians and Pagans,” which addresses the problem of theodicy:<sup>83</sup>

Men go to God when they are sore bestead,  
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread,  
For mercy for them sick, sinning, or dead;  
All men do so, Christian and unbelieving.  
Men go to God when he is sore bestead,  
Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,  
Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead;  
Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving.  
God goeth to every man when sore bestead,

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<sup>83</sup>Draмм, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Albert Camus*, 95.

Feedeth body and Spirit with his bread;  
 For Christians, pagans alike, he hangeth dead,  
 And both alike forgiving. (*LPP* 200)

Bonhoeffer suggests that in the time of need all people turn to God. One consequence of Bonhoeffer's doctrine of a mutable God finds expression here: God is helpless and weak. Bonhoeffer goes so far to say that Christians support God in his time of grief. The basic idea is that humanity is asked to participate in God's sufferings in a world without God. Plainly, Christians do not participate through religious acts, but by suffering with God in the nonreligious life (*LPP* 198). In Bonhoeffer's mind, it is more important to consider God's suffering in this "world" than "our own sufferings" (*LPP* 202). Here, then, theodicy seems again to resolve into God's suffering, and now human beings take part in God's sufferings. And human beings receive comfort and support by being co-sufferers with God. In this, Bonhoeffer eliminates the Creator/creature distinction. At the end of the poem, the *theologia crucis* is the hope for all. As "reality" had the potency to kill Christ on the cross, so reality dealt now with other human beings: in Germany in 1944, the Reich killed millions of Jewish people.<sup>84</sup>

#### *D. The Sufferings of Christ*

Bonhoeffer could still write to his parents on April 25, 1943 that the focus on Christ's sufferings must be understood in the light of Christ's resurrection. "Good Friday and Easter," as two inseparable events, provide us with freedom, for they inform us "about the ultimate meaning of all life, suffering, and events; and we lay hold of a great hope" (*LPP* 42). Bonhoeffer in his *Letters* refers to the NT verse, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" His understanding of suffering is closer to some views expressed by the French existentialist novelist, Albert Camus,<sup>85</sup> than to the biblical truth that he expressed almost two years earlier in his *Letters*. It follows now that the Christian must "drink the earthly cup" (*LPP* 186). Most importantly, "Christ takes hold of a man at the centre of his life" (*LPP* 186). The "reality" that Christ faced all men must be understood as being actual: Germans, like Christ, found themselves "godforsaken."<sup>86</sup> On July 16, 1944, Bonhoeffer concluded, "The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us" (*LPP* 196). In the final analysis, Bonhoeffer, with his idea of a world come of age and of Christian worldliness, could have shared Camus's idea of "a saint

<sup>84</sup>Liderbach, "Martin Luther's Theology of Suffering," 127.

<sup>85</sup>For Albert Camus, as God abandons all other innocent, suffering individuals, so he abandoned Christ. Hence, the cross becomes for Camus "the surrender of God" (*The Plague* [trans. Stuart Gilbert; New York: Vintage International, 1991], 217). See Damm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer und Albert Camus*, 113.

<sup>86</sup>Liderbach, "Martin Luther's Theology of Suffering," 196.

without God."<sup>87</sup> In this final and fragmented work, some of Bonhoeffer's earlier thoughts find fuller expression. He consciously speaks in a "nonreligious" manner about God. Such speaking reveals the godlessness of the world, which becomes exposed to the light. The "world come of age" is more nonreligious and yet somehow closer to God (*LPP* 200).

## V. CONCLUSION

In the light of this essay, Bonhoeffer's theodicy has certain commendable aspects, but also some significant shortcomings in his doctrine of God. It has become clear that his early theology and his mature theology (as expressed in his *Letters*) reveal continuity in his thought. The ideas in his *Letters* are not novel; rather, they grew out of his former *Weltanschauung*, his doctrine of God and Christology. These ideas became deeper and more fully expressed in Bonhoeffer's intense *Sitz im Leben* in Tegel. This essay has revealed that Bonhoeffer was not concerned with providing a rational explanation of evil. Rather, he attempted to solve the problem of evil through the *theologia crucis*, thus offering a "christological theodicy." The most problematic aspect of his theodicy is his doctrine of God, which is far removed from the traditional doctrine of God.

Yet God, for Bonhoeffer, was not responsible for Auschwitz. The source of evil must be located in humankind, and not in God. At the same time, although Bonhoeffer tried to be faithful to the concept of God's sovereignty in his earlier theology, his attempt to deal with the problem of evil in his mature theology falls far short of acknowledging God's sovereignty over history. This failure is best understood in the light of his untraditional doctrine of God.<sup>88</sup> Bonhoeffer assumes that God became a new reality at Auschwitz. Interestingly, this view was affirmed by "post-Auschwitz theology," which asserts that it is unfeasible to refer to "a God who is both omnipotent and good."<sup>89</sup>

The consideration of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the fall provided some helpful insights into his theodicy. It has been shown that Bonhoeffer does display a genuine interest in the fall. His point, in essence, is that the fall is best explained by bringing Christ back

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<sup>87</sup>Camus, *The Plague*, 255.

<sup>88</sup>Some serious problems arise when one employs the doctrine of divine suffering in a Christian theodicy. In this regard, Bonhoeffer's theodicy is inadequate because it comes closer to open theism than to the teaching of Scripture. According to the NT, God does not suffer on the cross with Christ. It was Christ's calling to atone for our sins and bear God's wrath. This is where God displayed his love for sinners. God through Jesus Christ took care of evil on the cross. Besides, "since God is a *se*," nothing can alter his character. See John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 180. As Frame states, God is not able to "suffer loss to his essential nature. Nor can anything defeat his eternal plan. In those senses, God is incapable of suffering" (p. 180).

<sup>89</sup>Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell; New York: Crossroad, 1987), 159.

into the center. As the famous sociologist, Peter L. Berger, points out, some theologians have focused only on anthropology in their theodicy as they deal with Auschwitz.<sup>90</sup> But Bonhoeffer addresses both anthropology and the fall, and he points to the true solution of the problem in his *theologia crucis*. Most important, he stresses both the death and the resurrection of Christ. *Christus Victor* is indeed the conqueror over evil and death. In his lectures on war, Bonhoeffer's view comes close to Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth's view:

The final theodicy is in no discovered system, no revealed plan, but in an effected redemption. It is not in the grasp of ideas, nor in the adjustment of events, but in the destruction of guilt and the taking away of the sin of the world.<sup>91</sup>

While Bonhoeffer makes Christology a leading element in his theodicy, he was unable to discuss the real nature of evil. As his notion of evil grew stronger during his final years, he remained faithful to his dialectical solution to the problem of evil. According to Henri Blocher, the French theologian, the dialectical resolution to the question of evil is helpful in making us aware that God can use the evil acts of human beings to bring about his own plans, "most notably the supremely evil act of the crucifixion of his son."<sup>92</sup> But this argument should not be pushed so far as to state that good springs from evil, as Bonhoeffer appears to suggest.

We can now return to the question that we posed at the beginning. Does Bonhoeffer make a helpful contribution to the question of theodicy with respect to Auschwitz and the church? In spite of the shortcomings in his theodicy, he reminds us that a proper theodicy begins its discussion of evil by returning to the beginning (Gen 1-3) and taking into account the fall. He supplies us with a practical theodicy that shows what God did to overcome evil. Above all, Bonhoeffer's theodicy directs us to the cross, which provides the only possible solution to theodicy. *Christus Victor* defeated evil. Bonhoeffer's theodicy is more practical, less abstract, and speculative. At the same time, the shortcomings of Bonhoeffer's theodicy make us aware again of the importance of not compromising the impassibility and sovereignty of God in the discussion of theodicy. Similarly, it is essential not to reduce the

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<sup>90</sup>Peter Berger has shown that theologians have been reluctant to discuss theodicy with regard to Auschwitz. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and World War I caused a great debate about theodicy, but for Berger the much "greater horrors of World War II did not have a similar result. Insofar as these events (particular those connected with the Nazi atrocities) raised metaphysical questions, as against ethical or political ones, these were typically anthropological rather than theological in character: 'How could men act this way?' rather than, 'How could God permit this?'" (Peter Berger is cited by Robert E. Willis, "Christian Theology after Auschwitz," *JES* 12/4 [1975]: 501).

<sup>91</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 49.

<sup>92</sup>Blocher, *Evil*, 83.

discussion of theodicy only to Christology or anthropology. And even if evil cannot be explained, the awful reality of it must be recognized and discussed.

To conclude, Bonhoeffer's concern for the cross is a crucial part of theodicy. As Blocher puts it,

At the cross, God turned evil against evil and brought about the practical solution to the problem. He has made atonement for sins, he has conquered death, he has triumphed over the devil. He has laid the foundation for hope. What further demonstration do we need?<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 104.

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