

THE FEELING OF TIME: BONHOEFFER ON TEMPORALITY AND THE FULLY HUMAN LIFE¹

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Abstract

*This essay explores the notion of temporality in Bonhoeffer's thought. After an introductory reference to an early text of Bonhoeffer that reveals his passion for movement and the moment, the essay comments briefly on the direction of Emmanuel Levinas's reflections on temporality. It is argued that both Levinas and Bonhoeffer link their understanding of temporality to otherness and death. The main part of the essay traces Bonhoeffer's understanding of the timeful nature of reality, with special reference to his Berlin dissertations, *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*, two of his Barcelona sermons, his *Ethics* and his *Prison* writings. The last section of the essay offers Bonhoeffer's timeful engagement with life as a challenge to a reductive economization of time.*

Keywords: D Bonhoeffer, E Levinas, Temporality, Time, The Other

A Passion for the Present

In 1923 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an illuminating matriculation essay entitled "Catullus and Horace as Lyric Poets." Bonhoeffer is clear that he wants to understand "what these poets mean *for us today*."² It is evident in Bonhoeffer's essay that he gives preference to the poetry of Catullus and that he is moved by Catullus's engagement with life. Bonhoeffer writes: "He hates and he loves. Everything is movement and temperament... Catullus transforms everything into passion."³ According to the young Bonhoeffer's observation, Horace and Catullus respond differently to the world. While Horace assumes a vantage point more external to the subject matter, Catullus sees himself in the midst of a vital part of life suddenly illumined. Whereas Horace expresses emotions about the world, Catullus expresses these emotions as they are bound up with his own emotions. Bonhoeffer also praises Catullus's humility over against the ambitious nationalism of Horace.⁴ He identifies

¹ This essay was read as a paper at the International Bonhoeffer Conference in Rome in June 2004.

² Bonhoeffer, D, *The Young Bonhoeffer: 1918-1927, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol 9*, (eds.) Matheny, PD, Green, CJ, Johnson, MD (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 198. In this remark we already see something of Bonhoeffer's lifelong commitment to relate what he reads to the present, to 'today.' This is exemplified most clearly in his question: 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?' See his famous letter in Bonhoeffer, D, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 270.

³ Bonhoeffer, *The Young Bonhoeffer*, 205.

⁴ In the editor's introduction to *The Young Bonhoeffer*, Paul Duane Matheny refers to Bonhoeffer's essay on Horace and Catullus in order to emphasize the value of humility within the Bonhoeffer family circle. Matheny also refers to Bonhoeffer's appreciation for Catullus's passionate and emotional engagement with life as mirror of Bonhoeffer's own desire for the richness of life (partly inherited from his mother). He continues:

more with a man that has written for a small circle of friends, than with Horace's ambition to write eternal poetry. With regard to the poetry of Horace, Bonhoeffer also feels that hardly any of his poems arise from *the moment*. It is difficult to condense the reasons for Bonhoeffer's preference for Catullus's poetry, but one can argue that Bonhoeffer preferred the passionate, dynamic and timeful poetry of Catullus to what he saw as the more objective, static and eternal poetry of Horace.

Without reflecting on the merit of his evaluation of these poets, this essay by the young Bonhoeffer already reveals important themes that would find further exposition and embodiment throughout his work and life. In this very early essay, one glimpses Bonhoeffer's 'passion for the present,' his appreciation for movement and a timeful, or kairotic, engagement with reality.

In this essay I would like to explore the notion of temporality in Bonhoeffer's thought. Although not a separate and systematically developed theme in his theology, Bonhoeffer's reflections on time and 'the moment' may be of great help to illuminate and renew our understanding of his use of the notions of personhood, community, life and God. The challenge, however, is not merely to reflect on Bonhoeffer's thinking about time, but also to think *with* Bonhoeffer on the implications of a more timeful understanding of the Christian life in the midst of what can be called an economization of time. My interest in Bonhoeffer's view of temporality is linked to the reflection on the concept of a Christian ethic of hospitality. Hospitality, as the welcoming openness towards the other and the stranger, requires what can be called *timeful embodiment*. It depends on making time *for* and receiving time *from* 'the other'. As has often been noted, Bonhoeffer's theology serves as a powerful source for viewing and facing otherness in a responsible and liberating way.⁵ However, not much has been written on how his understanding of the 'other' (which he connects to the interrelation of the self, community and God) intertwines with his wrestling with the problem and mystery of time.

In the reflection on the theme of time and otherness, the thought of the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, comes to mind.⁶ While it is not the aim of this paper to discuss Levinas's views on temporality fully, a few brief remarks can be heuristically helpful in order to focus the discussion of Bonhoeffer's understanding of time. The similarities, amidst important differences, between the thought of Levinas and Bonhoeffer are remarkable indeed.⁷ Both of them critique a self-enclosed understanding of personhood and make a plea for the recognition of and responsibility for 'the Other' as precondition for the possibility of ethics. After commenting briefly on the direction of Levinas's reflections on temporality, the main part of this essay attempts to trace Bonhoeffer's understanding of temporality in conjunction with notions like personhood, community, death, life and God. It

"As a young student he was to argue that the fullness of life, its emotions and passions, rather than mere ideas, is what conquers the world" (*The Young Bonhoeffer*, 5).

⁵ On Bonhoeffer and the theme of otherness, see for example: Clifford Green's editorial introduction to *Sanctorum Communio*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Floyd, WW, *Theology and the Dialectics of Otherness: On Reading Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Adorno* (Landham, MD: University Press of America, 1988; Smit, DJ, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and 'The Other.'" *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 93, 1995:3-16.

⁶ See, for instance his early study *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987). This book, *Le temps et l'autre* in French, was first delivered as a series of four lectures in 1946/47 and published in 1948 in J Wahl, *Le Choix – Le Monde – L'Existence* (Grenoble-Paris: Arthaud, 1947, 125-196).

⁷ For an attempt to bring the work of Bonhoeffer and Levinas into conversation, see Bongmba, E, "The Priority of the Other: Ethics in Africa – Perspectives from Bonhoeffer and Levinas" in De Gruchy, J (ed.), *Bonhoeffer for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 190-208.

is argued that Bonhoeffer's *timeful understanding of reality* serves as an important hermeneutical key to illuminate his thought.

Time and the Other

While Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of temporality certainly warrants further and fuller inquiry,⁸ I want to highlight only two aspects of Levinas's thought which relates respectively to the relationship between time and the other and the relationship between time and death.

In his series of lectures published in English as *Time and the Other*, Levinas clearly states his understanding of temporality in relation to the notion of the Other: "(T)ime is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but ... is the very relationship of the subject with the Other."⁹ He rejects the way in which the classical Western philosophical tradition (including Bergson and Heidegger) conceives time in relation to the solitary subject, whether thought of objectively or subjectively. According to this tradition, time is either viewed as exterior to the subject (as a time object) or entirely contained in the solitary subject. In the process classical philosophy left aside the freedom that consists in having one's being pardoned by the very alterity of the other. In Levinas's words: "It underestimates the alterity of the other in dialogue where the other frees us, because it believes there existed a silent dialogue of the soul with itself."¹⁰ Time is then conceived within this self-enclosed inner dialogue. For Levinas, however, the Other is not an *alter ego*; the Other cannot be reduced to the self-sufficiency of the same or contained within the solitary subject. Between the self and the other is an asymmetrical inter-subjective space and time. Hence Levinas does not link time to the solitary, knowing I, because knowledge conceals re-presentation and reduces the Other to presence and co-presence. Time, on the contrary, in its dia-chrony, signifies a relationship that does not compromise the alterity of the other. Time is for Levinas not a degradation of eternity, but a relationship with that which is of itself infinity, which cannot be comprehended. The time of the Other interrupts and disrupts my temporality.

A second remark has to do with Levinas's understanding of the relationship between time and death. In this regard Levinas critiques Heidegger's understanding of time by arguing that his understanding of death is not radical enough. Heidegger emphasizes the fact that it is ultimately death that opens up the horizons for temporality. Death for Heidegger is not merely my own, it is precisely *most* my own; death individualize *Dasein*. Levinas feels that Heidegger hereby does not overcome Western metaphysics, but actually stays bound to it. For Levinas death's alterity is intractable. It is also for Levinas not my

⁸ The notion of temporality lies at the heart of Levinas's thought. Already his 1947 book *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978) ends with an important section entitled 'On the Way to Time.' The theme of time is also, as the title testifies, prominent in *Time and the Other*. See also the section 'The Ethical Relation and Time' (220-253) in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), as well as the section 'Time and Discourse' (31-45) in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981). Two important later essays 'Diachrony and Representation' (1982) and 'The Old and the New' (1980) are also included in *Time and the Other*. Also of importance is Levinas's university lectures (1975-1976) published as *God, Death, and Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). For a thought-provoking engagement with Levinas's thinking on temporality, see Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). For a series of articles on Levinas and time, see also *Cahiers de 'Etudes Lévinassiennes: Lévinas, le temps* (Arcueil: Gilles Hanus, 2002/1: 7-97).

⁹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 39.

¹⁰ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 97.

own death, but the death of the other that is of primary significance. Hence Levinas sees death not as the uttermost possibility of subjectivity, but as a countermovement against it. Time is located within this countermovement. As Richard Cohen perceptively states in the introduction to *Time and the Other*: “The future is not what comes out of me in my being-towards-death ... but what comes at me, outside my possibilities, not as the mastery of death but as the mystery of death.”¹¹ This is the relationship with a future that is more than self-presence. Death does not confirm my solitude, but shatters it. Levinas finds the alterity of the future not in the possibility of death but in death as mystery. The movement of time does not temporalize in a linear way. Rather, “its way of signifying, marked by the mystery of death, makes a detour by entering into the ethical adventure of the relationship to the other person.”¹² It is in the relation to the other person, in the vulnerable face of the Other, where God comes to mind. Here we see how the notions of time, death and the Other coincide in Levinas’s thought.

These cursory remarks highlight something of Levinas’s attempt to free time from the solitary, knowing subject and to link it in a radical way to alterity. A careful reading of Bonhoeffer reveals that he also understands time in relation to radical otherness, albeit by utilizing theological language in a more overt way.

Time, Personhood and Community

If one turns to Bonhoeffer’s doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* it becomes clear that his understanding of personhood is not to be separated from his understanding of temporality. In this work, Bonhoeffer examines theologically the given reality of the church, as revealed in Christ, from the perspective of social philosophy and sociology. For Bonhoeffer the concepts of person, community and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated. What is especially of interest for this essay is how Bonhoeffer’s critique of idealism’s view of personhood is intertwined with its understanding of temporality. Bonhoeffer comments: “The issue here is the problem of time... Kant taught that continuously advancing time was a pure form of the mind’s intuition. The result in Kant and in all of idealism is essentially a timeless way of thinking.”¹³

Although Bonhoeffer states that he does not have the intention to dispute the epistemological understanding of time as a pure form of intuition, his starting point is different. He wants to think about time with regard to the ethical demand arising from the confrontation with another person. The self enters a state of responsibility and decision *at the moment of being addressed* by another person. The person that is being addressed is not the idealist’s person of mind or reason but ‘the person in concrete, living individuality.’¹⁴ This is the person that does not exist “in timeless fullness of value and spirit, but in a state of responsibility in the midst of time.”¹⁵ It is the moment of responsibility in the midst of time that gives birth to the ethical. With regard to the moment Bonhoeffer writes:

The moment is not the shortest span of time, a mechanically conceived atom, as it were. The ‘moment’ is the time of responsibility, value-related time, or, let us say, time related to God; and, most essentially, it is concrete time. Only in concrete time is the real claim of ethics effectual; and only when I am responsible am I fully conscious of being bound

¹¹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 9.

¹² Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 33.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 47.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 48.

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 48.

to time ... I enter the reality of time by relating my concrete person in time and all its particularities to this imperative – by making myself ethically responsible.¹⁶

Here we see the close link between time, person and responsibility in Bonhoeffer's thought. Time according to idealist epistemology is for Bonhoeffer different than time according to a Christian concept of the person in the same way as sound lies in different spheres of perception for musicians and physicists. A Christian concept of the person implies a more dynamic and timeful view in which the person does not exist timelessly, but always and only in ethical responsibility in the flux of life.

One can also call attention to the way in which Bonhoeffer refers to temporal notions in *Sanctorum Communio* in order to highlight his understanding of community. In his discussion of the problem of community, Bonhoeffer follows the well-known distinction by Ferdinand Tönnies between society (*Gesellschaft*) and community (*Gemeinschaft*) and shows how they relate differently to time. The temporal intention of a community is to reach the boundary of time (*grenzzeitlich*) and that of a society is timebound (*zeitbegrenzt*). The eschatological character of community is the basis of the 'holiness' of human community life. This holiness reveals the fundamental indissolubility of these life structures. Over against this, society remains timebound and thus the end of history is for society a real end, not merely a boundary. For Bonhoeffer this is the reason why only a community (and not a society) can become a church. Thus the grappling with the concept of time is for Bonhoeffer important in order to understand the concept of the church.¹⁷ For Bonhoeffer the church is not an unattainable ideal, but a concrete and present reality.¹⁸ The community is in time, but also transcends time. This dialectic is at the heart of Christ's relationship to the church. This relationship is to be understood in a dual sense: "(1) The church is already completed in Christ, time is suspended. (2) The Church is to be built within time as the firm foundation. Christ is the historical principle of the church."¹⁹

Time, Death and Service

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer refers in dense academic prose to a concrete and timeful understanding of personhood and community. Throughout his life these ideas found reiteration and concretization, not merely in his books, presentations and letters, but also in his sermons. Two early sermons, preach in Barcelona, especially makes for interesting reading in this regard.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 48.

¹⁷ It is important to note that Bonhoeffer also regards the concept of the body as of great importance for understanding the concept of the church. See especially *Sanctorum Communio*, 104, 286.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer thus contrast his understanding of the church with idealist theories of community: "Christian community ... considers Christian community to be God's church-community at every moment in history. And yet within its historical development it never knows a state of fulfillment. It will remain impure as long as there is history, and yet in this concrete form it is nevertheless God's church community" (*Sanctorum Communio*, 281).

¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 153. This dialectic is also emphasized with regard to Christ's vicarious representative action: "It is simultaneously 'within concrete time' and the 'for all times'" (155). Towards the end of *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer returns to the notions of communities 'being at the limited of time' (*Grenzzeitlichkeit*) and societies 'being limited in time' (*Zeitbegrenztheit*). Bonhoeffer makes it clear that although eternal judgment is passed on both, the community as a collective person can expect eternal life, whereas the society dissolves (*Sanctorum Communio*, 284).

On the 26th of August 1928, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon on 1 John 2:17: “The world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of the God live forever.”²⁰ In this sermon Bonhoeffer mentions two reasons why time is a horrifying concept. The first reason relates to the fact that time cannot be undone. What happened has happened. Guilt stays guilt; omission stays omission. This is the truth that causes people, and will cause people in the future, the most tears. The second point that testifies to the horrific nature of time is related to the movement of time. It moves towards death. The world with its desires, beauty, humanness and culture will perish. Nothing is forever, not even the works of Beethoven, Bach, Goethe or Michelangelo. Death shows the seriousness of the world. Bonhoeffer calls the hearers to treat death as the ultimate boundary with utmost seriousness. But he also calls them to open their eyes for the beginning of newness on this boundary. Here time loses its violence to eternity. In the process the ultimate, death, becomes the penultimate. Eternity, however, is not something removed from us, because in Jesus Christ, God stretched God’s hand out into time – in the midst of frail mortality and death – and humans can receive that hand and be drawn into eternity. This is the wonder of the revelation in Jesus Christ. In the midst of darkness and the frail and fleeting nature of life stands the Cross as a sign of eternity. Through the Cross people become, here in the midst of time, carriers of eternity. The world and its desires perish, but those who do the will of God dwell in eternity. How does one become a person that dwells in eternity? The answer that Bonhoeffer recalls from the text is remarkably simply: “Do the will of God.” This means: “Go home and love your brothers and sisters, your wife, your children, your parents, and your friends... Help those who need help... Be peace loving and compassionate, be pure of thought and word; you live in the world.”²¹

These few fragments from Bonhoeffer’s sermon illustrates that Bonhoeffer, like Levinas, does not hesitate to relate time to the radical otherness of death. There is no sentimentalized or esoteric view of the relation between time and eternity. For Bonhoeffer both time and death are related to God and the will of God, i.e., to live responsibly and compassionate in the midst of time.

These ideas also resound in another revealing sermon of Bonhoeffer, preached on the 23rd of September 1928. The text is Rom 12:11c, which is often translated as ‘Serve the Lord.’ Bonhoeffer, though, follows the translation: ‘Serve the time’ (*Dienet der Zeit*). In this sermon, Bonhoeffer states that those who want to find eternity must serve the time.²² It is only in time that you find God and eternity. He therefore highlights the importance of the moment, of the present: “(T)he present is sacred, it stands under God’s eyes, it is consecrated, it is permeated by eternal light... Whoever flees the present is fleeing God’s hour; whoever flees time is fleeing God. Serve time!”²³ To serve time is not for Bonhoeffer to serve what is fashionable. It is to serve God’s time. It is to be a people of the present in the deepest sense of the word. It is to serve the need of the moment. This implies a certain critical solidarity with the times.²⁴ Bonhoeffer also refers in this sermon to the myth of the

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, D, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928-1931, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol 10*, ed. Green, CJ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 516. For the German text of this sermon, see Bonhoeffer, D, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke 10 (München: Chr Kaiser Verlag, 1991), 499-504.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, 520.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, 527. Bonhoeffer continues: “If you want what is intransitory, then focus on what is transitory. If you want what is eternal, focus on what is temporal. *If you want God, focus on the world*” (528). For the German text, see Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika*, 513.

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, 528, 529.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer also points to the importance of solidarity with the contemporary world in his presentation in Barcelona on “The Tragedy of the Prophetic and Its Lasting Meaning.” He comments: “We are twentieth-

giant Antaeus whose power lies in the fact that he keeps both feet on the ground. Only those who are true to the earth serve the moment, and thereby serve eternity. Bonhoeffer's call to his hearers is to be people of the holy present. Bonhoeffer ends the sermon with a refrain that he also uses earlier in the sermon, a refrain that links time to a trinitarian description of God: "The Lord of the ages is God. The turning point of the ages is Christ. The true spirit of the age [*Zeitgeist*] is the Holy Spirit" (*Der Herr der Zeiten ist Gott. Der Zeiten Wendepunkt ist Christus. Der rechte Zeitgeist ist der Heilige Geist*).²⁵

In these sermons, we see how Bonhoeffer relates time to the other and to God. Here is a plea for people and communities to live in the midst of time with responsibility and compassion. In the *Nachwort* to *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika*, Reinhart Staat makes the important remark that many nationalistic theologians (like E. Hirsch) would also see the time as a *zeitenwende*, as *kairos*.²⁶ This is important because Bonhoeffer's plea is not merely for the moment (for the *kairos*). Rather, he links *kairos* to the Logos, to Christ. One finds in Christ not merely the solidarity with the times, but also the prophetic critique thereof.

Temporality and Revelation

After a year in Barcelona, Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin where he wrote his brilliant and extremely challenging *Habilitationschrift, Act and Being*. Without repeating Bonhoeffer's whole argument, it is worthwhile to pay closer attention to his critique of especially Heidegger and Barth with regard to the notion of temporality. Bonhoeffer probably read Heidegger's *Being and Time* (published in 1927) in Barcelona at the insistence of his cousin Hans-Christoph von Hase (who was studying in Marburg at the time).²⁷ Bonhoeffer appreciates Heidegger's attempt to interpret being essentially in terms of temporality and not as timeless essence. But Bonhoeffer's reservations with regard to Heidegger is also clear. He feels, like Levinas, that Heidegger's concept of being remains self-contained. Bonhoeffer writes: "Heidegger's philosophy is a consciously atheistic philosophy of finitude. Everything in it is related to the fact that finitude is enclosed in itself through *Dasein*."²⁸ The result is that no room is left for the concept of revelation and therefore Bonhoeffer concludes that Heidegger's concept of being (notwithstanding its enormous expansion through the discovery of the existential sphere) 'remains unsuitable for theology.'²⁹

Here we see how the concept of revelation is pivotal for Bonhoeffer as a critique against self-enclosed finitude. Already in *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer wrote: "Revelation enters into time not just apparently but actually, and precisely by so doing it bursts the form of time."³⁰ Bonhoeffer's use of the notion of revelation suggests his affinity for the thought

century people and, like it or not, must come to terms with that fact; indeed, even more, we should have so much love for this contemporary world of ours, for our fellow human beings, that we should declare our solidarity with it in its crisis as well as our hope" (*Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, 326). Bonhoeffer's own struggle to live responsibly in the midst of the realities of Nazi Germany testifies to his own critical solidarity with the times.

²⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York*, 531. This was also the motto of Bonhoeffer's great grandfather, Karl August von Hase.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika*, 606.

²⁷ See Hans-Richard Reuter's Afterword to *Act and Being*, 167.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 72.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 72.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 143.

of Karl Barth. But it is also interesting to note some critical remarks of Bonhoeffer on the (early) Barth. We hear Barth's voice when Bonhoeffer writes that revelation is an event that has its basis in the freedom of God, positively as the self-giving or, negatively, as the self-withholding of God. However, Bonhoeffer continues by saying that although Barth uses temporal categories (like instant, now, beforehand, afterwards, etc.), his concept of act should not be regarded as temporal: "God's freedom and the act of faith are essentially supratemporal."³¹ Because no historical moment is capable of bearing the infinite, faith and obedience are at best reference to God's activity and in its historicity can never be faith and obedience in itself.

In reading *Act and Being*, one senses that Bonhoeffer wants to find a way between the temptation to draw reality into the historic subject (thus a type of self-enclosed temporality) and the temptation to emphasize God's freedom and *aseity* at the cost of God's *promiscuity* (thus a type of ahistorical supratemporality). Hence Bonhoeffer writes: "God is free not from human beings but for them. Christ is the word of God's freedom. God *is* present, that is, not in eternal nonobjectivity but 'haveable', graspable in the Word within the church."³²

For Bonhoeffer, revelation should be thought of in reference to the concept of the church as constituted by the present proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection. Christian revelation is not something that has happened in the past, but as something in each 'present': "Christian revelation must occur in the present precisely because it is, in the qualified once-and-for-all occurrence of the cross and the resurrection of Christ, always something 'of the future.'"³³ Bonhoeffer's plea is not merely for the importance of the 'present', but he also understands the present Christologically.³⁴

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 84. For further critique on the notion of supratemporality, see also Bonhoeffer's remark: "If the act of the new I has its continuity in the supratemporal, then the danger of a theology of experience is indeed wholly averted; but this occurs at the expense of the historicity of human beings and, hence, the existential character of act... The eternal act comes, by nature, 'before' 'every' historical act... Barth is quite aware that he has to define the total I as historical, and yet his concepts are already overdefined before he even takes up the concept of the historical. Barth says everything that has to be said here, but he says to much beforehand" (Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 100). Bonhoeffer makes it clear that 'the essence of the *actus directus* does not lie in its timelessness, but in its intentionality towards Christ, which is not repeatable because it is freely given by Christ' (100). Bonhoeffer, of course, did not have access to the later work of Barth. For a good reading of the relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer, see Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³² Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 90, 91.

³³ Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 111. In a footnote Bonhoeffer remarks that this might be the starting point for a distinctively Christian philosophy of time in contrast to the concept of time as something reckoned by motion. Here the influence of Eberhard Grisebach is evident. In his inaugural lecture at Berlin 'Humans in contemporary philosophy and Theology,' Bonhoeffer's appreciation for Grisebach's understanding of 'the present' is clear (the reference is to Grisebach, *Gegenwart: Eine kritische Ethik*, Halle, 1929, 511ff). Bonhoeffer also notes that the real new thing in Grisebach's philosophy is his emphasis that one cannot think of a person without concrete other persons. This is of course also emphasized by Bonhoeffer in his own understanding of selfhood and temporality. Bonhoeffer further critiques Grisebach for making the 'You' (*Du*) absolute in place of the 'I' and by giving it a position that can only be God's. It is still the 'I' that absolutizes, or relativizes, the other person. See Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), 59; Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika*, 357-378.

³⁴ See especially the section 'Being in Christ' towards the end of *Act and Being* (150-161). See also Bonhoeffer's remark in *Christology* (London: Collins, 1966): 'Because Jesus Christ is man, he is present in time and space; because Jesus Christ is God, he is eternally present... God in timeless eternity is not God; Jesus limited by time is not Jesus. Rather we may say that in the man Jesus God is God. In this Jesus Christ, God is present. This one God-man is the starting point for Christology.'

Against Timeless Ethics

The reality of the *Christus praesens*, of Christ's presence in history, has immense implications for the witness of the church. Already in 1932, Bonhoeffer wrote in his presentation "On the Theological Basis of the Work of the World Alliance": "The church must be able to say the Word of God, the word of authority, here and now, in the most concrete way possible, from knowledge of the situation. The church must not preach timeless principles however true, but only commandments that are true today. God is 'always' God to us 'today.'"³⁵ And he continues by emphasizing that these words need embodiment. The gospel becomes concrete in the lives of those who hear and preach.

Bonhoeffer's life and later writings testify about his struggle to hear God's word for the present moment amidst the rise of Nazi power and the horrors of war. Indeed, Bonhoeffer can be seen, in Andre Dumas's apt phrase, as 'a prophet of the present.'³⁶

In his *Ethics*, we see the further reverberation of Bonhoeffer's timeful understanding of reality. Ethics is not a matter of abstract and timeless principles; it is about the way Christ takes form among us here and now. In Bonhoeffer we thus find an extremely live sense of historical consciousness. This is especially well illustrated in the essay in *Ethics* called 'Heritage and Decay.' Here Bonhoeffer writes about the concept of historical inheritance, which he links to the consciousness of temporality that opposes all mythologization. Bonhoeffer wants to think about history in the light of God's entry into history at a definite place and a specific time through the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Here history becomes a serious matter without being sanctified: "Through the life and death of Jesus Christ, history becomes not the transient bearer of eternal values but, for the first time, thoroughly temporal."³⁷ To ask about historical inheritance therefore is thus not about asking timeless questions about the value of the past that is valid for eternity. It is rather to realize that we are grounded in history. Thus, to ask about history is to ask about the present and the way in which the present is taken up by God in Christ.

Throughout Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* we see Bonhoeffer's commitment to concrete reality and historic existence. If the question of the good is abstracted from life and history, it becomes a static basic formula that transposes humans into a private and ideal vacuum. This leads either to private withdrawal or misguided enthusiasm. Bonhoeffer's ethics is a critique of the abstract and the timeless and a plea for the concrete and the timeful. This finds its deepest motivation in Bonhoeffer's understanding of the interrelation between theology and life. Reflection on Bonhoeffer's understanding of temporality cannot be separated from his concern for living a fully human life in the face of God's presence. For Bonhoeffer 'ethics' is tied to a definite time and place. This does not imply the decisionistic ethic of the moralist that rests on the myth that every moment of life involves a conscious choice between good and evil. Rather, it is to realize that in historical existence everything has its time (Eccl. 3). Bonhoeffer wants to guard against what he calls the "unhealthy takeover of life by the ethical."³⁸ Such a pathological overburdening of life by the ethical destroys the creaturely wholeness of life.

³⁵ For this speech, see Kelly, GB and Burton, FB, *Testament of Freedom*, (HarperSanFrancisco, New York, 1990), 104.

³⁶ Dumas, A, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theology of Reality* (New York, The MacMillan Company, 1971), 287-293.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol 6*, (ed.) Green, C (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 26.

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 366. For Bonhoeffer there is a time for 'ethics' and a time to refrain from 'ethics.' He writes: "Times when the ethical became, and needed to become, a topic for discussion must be followed by times when what is moral is once again self-evident; when one does not merely operate at the boundaries but in the center and richness of daily life" (*Ethics*, 369).

Bonhoeffer makes it clear that ethical discourse is not a system of prepositions that is available for application at any time or any place. Such timeless and placeless ethical discourse lacks authenticity and durability. Ethical discourse is inseparably linked with particular persons, definite times and concrete places and relations. When the ethical is conceived in a timeless and placeless manner, Bonhoeffer notes, then life falls apart in an infinite number of unconnected atoms of time. Ethical discourse requires a different sense of time. Bonhoeffer formulates it as follows: “Genuine ethical discourse involves more than a onetime pronouncement. It needs repetition and continuity, it demands time”³⁹ Herein lies the burden and agony, but also the authenticity and dignity of ethical discourse.

Bonhoeffer argues against a timeless and abstract ethic that dislocates the ethical from a particular time and concrete place, as well as from the Word addressed to people in these concrete situations and relations. As we know, these views of Bonhoeffer found concrete embodiment in his own struggles of conscience. While Bonhoeffer’s ethic is not an atomization or glorification of ‘the moment,’ it nonetheless points to the importance of the kairos, the concrete moment of truth. Moreover, the kairos is not to be separated from the Logos, from Christ.

The Torment and Healing of Time

If one traces Bonhoeffer’s understanding of temporality, a certain existential intensification of his understanding of time becomes evident. This is to be expected, given the turmoil of the war and his prison experiences. In a letter written on 15 May 1943 to his parents from Tegel prison, he makes reference to his work on a little study called ‘The feeling of time.’⁴⁰ Unfortunately this study is lost, but a few surviving notes reveal something of the way in which questions regarding time occupied Bonhoeffer’s mind during those troubling times. These notes (dated 8 May 1943; or between 1 and 11 May) are too cursory to reconstruct the outline of a possible study. However, they offer a glimpse into Bonhoeffer’s thought. Bonhoeffer jotted down phrases like: “Time as separation – separation from people, work, the past, the future, marriage and God... Different mental attitudes towards the past ... forgetting... Self-deception, idealizing the past and of the future... Overcoming memories!”⁴¹

Apart from the thinking about separation, memory and the past, Bonhoeffer is also wrestling with the emptiness of time. Hence reference to “amusement – passing the time ... humour... Smoke in the emptiness of time.”⁴² There is also reference to the teeth of time – the gnawing of time.” These notes point to what Bonhoeffer (in the sermon recalled earlier) describes as the seriousness of time and death.⁴³ Time becomes the enemy, time is torment.

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 375.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 39.

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 33.

⁴² In a letter dated 4 June 1943 Bonhoeffer notes: “I’ve just written a little more about ‘The feeling of time’; I’m very much enjoying it, and when we write from personal experiences, we can write more fluently and freely.” He also refers to reading Kant’s *Anthropologie*. He especially enjoyed Kant’s exposition of smoking as a means of entertainment. Bonhoeffer also requested his father to send him something on the forms and function of memory. See *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 50.

⁴³ Round about the same time as these letters (or just thereafter) Bonhoeffer wrote the drama collected in *Fiction from Prison*, The Bonhoeffer Works vol 7, ed. Green, C (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Bonhoeffer existential wrestling with death and the past is portrayed in this drama. For insightful commentary on this drama (and other fiction written by Bonhoeffer in prison), see Renate Bethge’s *Afterword (205-233)*. See also the poem ‘Stations on the Way to Freedom’ where the last verse is titled ‘Death’: “Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal; death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish/the walls of our temporal body, the walls of our soul that are blinded, so that at last we may see that which remains

In these notes, moreover, there are also references to the healing of time and the overcoming of time in prayer.

In the letter of 15 May 1943, Bonhoeffer recalls the fact that one of his predecessors scribbled over the cell door, “In a hundred years it will be all over.” This was his way of countering the emptiness of time. In this letter Bonhoeffer also make reference to Psalm 31 (“My time is in your hands”). Here we see how Bonhoeffer does not merely reflect on the anxiety of time in the face of death, but also makes reference to the prayerful assertion of God’s relation to our life and times. But this truth does not take away the pain brought by the teeth of time. Hence his reference to the question from the psalms that threatens to dominate everything: ‘How long, O Lord’ (Psalm 13).⁴⁴

In a letter written on the Monday after Pentecost, Bonhoeffer writes: “My study on ‘The feeling of time’ is practically finished; now I’m going to let it lie for a while and see what it looks like later.”⁴⁵ He also thanks his parents for the parcel of potatoes and turnips that brought much happiness to him.⁴⁶ Bonhoeffer wrestled theologically with the seriousness of time, but he also showed appreciation for the gift of time, a gift for and from the other.

Time and the fully Human Life

In the beginning of this essay, I remarked that the challenge is not merely to reflect *on* Bonhoeffer’s understanding of time, but also to think *with* Bonhoeffer (and Levinas) about a more fully human life amidst what can be called an economization of time. Something of the economization of time is reflected in the uncritical embrace of phrases like ‘time is money.’ Time is viewed as something people ‘spend’ or ‘save.’ Time becomes a valuable commodity that one loses if you go too slow. Life becomes a matter of the survival of the fittest. In the process, those who are not fast or mobile enough are marginalized and often suffer materially and emotionally. ‘Economic time’ often infiltrates life in such a way that time for the other, time for hospitality, time for friendships or leisure, is viewed, often unconsciously, as an unproductive waste of time. Time becomes a valuable possession of the individual to be managed and protected. Such an economization of time robs humanity of its humanness and compromises the witness of Christians to the God who became time and flesh in Jesus Christ.

The 1996 film *The Eight Day*, directed by Jaco Van Dormael, wonderfully reflects something of such a mindset of economized time and the way in which an ‘other’ interrupts

hidden./Freedom, how long we have sought thee in discipline, action, and suffering;/dying, we now may behold thee revealed in the Lord (*Letters and Papers*, 371).

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 39.

⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 54. See also the letter to Eberhard Bethge (18 Nov 1943) where Bonhoeffer writes: “An essay on ‘The Feeling of Time’ originated mainly in the need to bring before me my own past in a situation that could so easily seem ‘empty’ and ‘wasted.’ Our past is always kept before us by thankfulness and penitence” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 129). See also Bonhoeffer’s poem ‘The Past’ (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 320-322). In this poem we read: “Unharmful by hostile time,/pure, free, and whole,/you are brought to me by dream,/you, my past, my life,/you the day and hour but lately gone... ‘The past will come to you once more,/and be your life’s enduring part,/through thanks and repentance./Feel in the past God’s forgiveness and goodness,/pray him to keep you today and tomorrow’” (322, 323).

⁴⁶ This ability to enjoy creaturely gifts in the moment is also reflected in Wolfgang Schrader’s reminiscence called ‘A Visit at Asparagus Time’ in Zimmermann, W and Smith, RG (eds.), *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1966). Schrader recalls Bonhoeffer’s visits to the old Finkelwalders: “It was a delight to see how Dietrich Bonhoeffer happily helped himself and enjoyed the tender asparagus – but without potatoes. He could be so modest in what he required, but he was able to relish good things to his heart’s content” (149).

and enriches time.⁴⁷ The film starts with a creation account of a mentally handicapped person named Georges (played by Pascal Duquenne). Georges account of creation starts as follows: “On the first day he made the sun. He switched on the day and switched of the night... Everyone’s eyes started to sting. Then he made the earth.” His account continues: “On the second day, he made grass. When you cut it, it screams because it hurts.” And so he continues day by day. “On the sixth day, he made everything he’d forgotten up till then: houses, radios, fridges, cars... Sunday, he had a rest. It was the seventh day.” Another character in the film is Harry (played by Daniel Auteuil). Harry is estranged from his family and works as a trainer of sales personnel. His sales philosophy has four cardinal rules: look the client in the eyes, smile, show that you are successful and be enthusiastic. At one stage Harry runs over George with his car and is ‘stuck’ with George. But this ‘interruption by an other’ actually teaches Harry how to laugh and live again. Later in the film Georges dies. The film ends with Harry giving his account of creation to his two daughters. At places it is similar to that of Georges’ account: “On the first day he made the sun. He switches on the day and switched out the night... On the second day he made water... On the sixth day he made people... On the seventh day it was time to rest, so he made the clouds. If you watch them long enough you can see all kinds of stories in them.” While lying on the lawn with his daughters, Harry ends his creation account with the words: “Then he wondered whether he had forgotten anything. And on the eight day, he made Georges. And he realized that that was that.”

Bonhoeffer’s theology and life testifies to the importance of making and receiving time for the other, time for friendship, time for responsible hospitality and time for peace. The gift of time is what makes us vulnerable, but it is also what enables us to live a fully human life. Bonhoeffer embodied what he perceived in Catullus’s poetry as a timeful passion for life. In his reflection *After Ten Years* (written for his friends from prison) Bonhoeffer writes about the value of time and the pain of lost time. He continues: “Time lost is time in which we have failed to live a full human life, gain experience, learn, create, enjoy, and suffer; it is time that has not been filled up, but left empty.”⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer does not see those years as time lost. He was graced to look at time differently. I think this ability to be open to the gift of time is not unrelated to what Bonhoeffer felt they also learned during those years. He calls it the importance of the ‘the view from below’: “We have for once learned 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.”⁴⁹ In an economizing and polarizing global society of societies, the *kairos* for Christian witness may reside in the ability to find time for and through the suffering other.

⁴⁷ In what follows the reference is to the screenplay, Jaco Van Dormael, *The Eight Day & Toto the Hero* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 3.

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 17.

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