

‘To speak of Christ is to be silent’  
*An interrogation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1933  
Lectures on Christology by Christopher Morse’s  
Methodology*

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## Introduction

The Methodist theologian Christopher Morse (1935-), Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair in Theology and Ethics at Union Seminary in New York, applies a particular methodological framework in his work of systematic theology *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*.<sup>1</sup> In this text, he explores Christian doctrines through what he calls ‘disbeliefs’. What is meant by this is summed up in the very first line of his text: ‘To believe in God is not to believe everything’<sup>2</sup>. With this he means that by making particular statements about what one believes, there are implicit statements which are rejected as not to be believed. It is this dialectical framework that he uses throughout his text, proposing for each doctrine certain ‘objections’, commonly statements that could be made about Christianity as proposed in some circles which Morse himself refuses to accept. In summary, he lists a number of ‘denials’ or ‘disbeliefs’ – statements or beliefs which are not to be affirmed by Christian doctrine. A useful summary of this approach can be found before his disbeliefs on the topic of Christology, a topic to which we will turn presently: ‘The following ... [are] positions and claims that are refused credit and credence by the commonly held affirmations of Christian Faith’<sup>3</sup>. In this instance he precedes to list twenty-three such disbeliefs of Christology and provide an analysis accordingly.

We turn now to the German Lutheran theologian, anti-fascist resistor, and *Bekennende Kirche*<sup>4</sup> pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). We will apply Morse’s method to Bonhoeffer’s 1933 Lecture on Christology, discussing three denials arising from the text. Bonhoeffer become an intriguing interlocutor for Morse, in part due to the mutual association between both theologians and Union Seminary. Bonhoeffer spent a quizzical year at Union Seminary in 1930<sup>5</sup>, and as previously stated, Morse holds the Bonhoeffer Chairship at Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed. (New York: T & T Clark, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Confessing Church’; see below.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), 82.

Bonhoeffer's life came to an end in 1945. He had worked for the Nazi intelligence agency and used his position as a platform to aid the resistance.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, and spent eighteen months in prisons and concentration camps from Buchenwald and eventually to Flossenbürg.<sup>7</sup> In a cruel irony, he was hung only weeks before the liberation of Flossenbürg by allied forces and the end of the war.<sup>8</sup>

The text to which we will be applying Morse's method are notes of Bonhoeffer's lectures on Christology given in Summer of 1933. It was in this year that the Nazi party rose to power in Germany and set about reorganising the German Evangelical Church in line with Nazi ideals, the *Deutsche Christen*<sup>9</sup> movement. The Confessing Church came to being in opposition to this movement in the following year with the *Barmer Theologische Erklärung*<sup>10</sup> written to oppose the Nazification of the established church.<sup>11</sup> It is amidst this context that Bonhoeffer delivered his lectures. He has much to say on the matter of Christology – it is for him the centre of all knowledge<sup>12</sup> – so we will concentrate on only a small amount of the much that could be said. The following three 'denials' emerge from the text and will be engaged in the following paragraphs. Firstly that 'Christ's claim to be the Word of God is a just claim'<sup>13</sup>; secondly that Christ is not truly present in the here and now<sup>14</sup>; and finally, that Christ's humiliation is in opposition to his exaltation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>F. Burton Nelson, "The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 39-40.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>8</sup>Christiane Tietz and Victoria Barnett, *Theologian of Resistance: The Life and Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), 110.

<sup>9</sup>I will continue to use the German term *Deutsche Christen* for the sake of clarity – Bonhoeffer himself could be called a German Christian by nature of his ethnicity and religious beliefs, but of course the term means something rather more specific.

<sup>10</sup>The Barmen Declaration, made by the Confessing Church.

<sup>11</sup>*New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, s.v. "Confessing Church."

<sup>12</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology (Student Notes)," in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, ed. Larry Rasmussen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 301.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 303.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 310.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 355.

## 1: Christ's claim to be the Word of God is a just claim

Bonhoeffer's theology is distinctly Christological. For Bonhoeffer, the question of Christ is of central importance not just for theology, but for all enquiries. He provides two frameworks for thinking about Christ – what he refers to as the 'why' question, and the 'how' question. The 'how' question asks 'how is it possible for [Christ] to exist?'<sup>16</sup> Yet for Bonhoeffer, this is not the question to be asked. Instead, the question becomes one of ontology, of exactly 'who' or what Christ is.<sup>17</sup> The answer for Bonhoeffer is that Christ is indeed the 'Logos of God'.<sup>18</sup> He sets down in no uncertain terms two questions that are to be denied, and it is the first of these that forms the basis of our argument here. Bonhoeffer denies that any human being should doubt the claims that Jesus himself made. There is no room in his thought for a Christology, any theology, that denies the divinity of Christ. For Bonhoeffer, there is no ignoring this question of who Christ is. To this point he uses the examples of Socrates and Goethe – dealing with them may have implications for one's education, however dealing with Christ has implications for 'life and death, salvation and damnation'<sup>19</sup> – issues of far greater importance than education. Christ is not just another thinker, but it is on him that our salvation rests.

There is an argument to be made that Bonhoeffer is here dealing with the liberal theology of his forebears (in particular von Harnack), but Andreas Pangritz draws our attention to the political climate in which Bonhoeffer was lecturing. Bonhoeffer here is not just defending the two natures of Christ, he is dismantling the *Deutsche Christen* conception of an 'Aryan Christ'.<sup>20</sup> Pangritz draws our attention to the Barmen Declaration, explaining that the root of the Confessing Church's defence against the *Deutsche Christen* was simply a defence of the doctrine of Christ outlined in the earliest creeds of the faith.<sup>21</sup> Arguments against the *Deutsche Christen* and the Nazi project in general are present

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 302-03.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>20</sup> Andreas Pangritz, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 136.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

throughout Bonhoeffer's work. The Church that was sympathetic to the Nazi cause latched onto not only Luther's writings and the nineteenth century pietism, but also German liberalism in theology.<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that this forms part of Bonhoeffer's thinking in his defence of traditional Christology. Perhaps it the argument can be made inversely, that the centrality of Christ in Bonhoeffer's thinking leads to his rejection of Nazi ideology and of liberal Christologies. In asking not *how* Jesus is God and Human, but rather *who* Jesus is, we are forced away from any self-aggrandising or any focus on race and our own identity.<sup>23</sup> For John A. Phillips, Bonhoeffer's Christocentricity of this period is a way in which he could avoid talking about church-state relations – avoiding discussion of Luther's Two Kingdoms which might endear him in any way to the *Deutsche Christen*. His ardent confession of Christ in largely traditional terms is thus a conscious effort to combat Nazi doctrine.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever the root cause of his Christocentric turn, for Bonhoeffer, Christ's works (his life, death and resurrection) are meaningless if he is simply an 'idealistic founder of a religion'.<sup>25</sup> Or more precisely stated, Christ may mean something as a teacher and as an individual who lived an ethical life, but this life is not at all salvific. It is not through any witnessing of Christ's works that we are capable of determining his identity as God and Human, but only by the revelation that Christ himself presents us.<sup>26</sup> This revelation is that 'Jesus is the Christ'.<sup>27</sup> There is no sense in which Bonhoeffer is willing to compromise Christ's divinity. Thus no one can say 'Christ's claim to be the Word of God is a just claim'<sup>28</sup>. It is perhaps *the* claim – the claim by which all else is measured; on which salvation rests; and by which National Socialist constructions of an Aryan Jesus are to be demolished.

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<sup>22</sup> James W. Woelfel, "The Development of a Christological Ethics under the Third Reich," in *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

<sup>23</sup> Charles Marsh, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 45.

<sup>24</sup> John A. Phillips, *The Form of Christ in the World: A Study of Bonhoeffer's Christology* (London: Collins, 1967), 110.

<sup>25</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 309.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-10.

<sup>27</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in Clifford J. Green, "Christ and Humanity in Bonhoeffer's Theology, 1932-1933," in *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 207.

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*.

## 2: Christ is not Truly Present in the Here and Now

The next movement in Bonhoeffer's Lecture discusses what he calls the '*pro-me*', the Christ who is truly present. Here he again sets himself in opposition to his liberal colleagues forerunners, Naming Schleiermacher, Herrman, and Ritschl.<sup>29</sup> For Bonhoeffer, Christ is really and truly present in the 'here and now'. Bonhoeffer sees these figures as taking Christ to be present only as an historical figure, but not as truly present at all times and in all places, in defence of which Bonhoeffer raises Luther's doctrine of ubiquity.<sup>30</sup> Indeed the presence of Christ has definitive sacramental implications. In distinction from his liberal compatriots, Bonhoeffer argues that the denial of Christ's presence ignores or rejects his resurrection. Bonhoeffer again mentions Socrates and Goethe, but in this context they are dead in contradistinction to the Christ who is risen.<sup>31</sup> Yet Bonhoeffer affirms the doctrine of a bodily resurrection against the symbolism of Schleiermacher and the denials of Ritschl and Herrman.<sup>32</sup> If Christ remains dead, not only is he unable to be present, but he is unable to provide salvation. It is here that Bonhoeffer quotes Paul: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.' [1 Cor 15:17 NRSV]. For this very resurrection to have taken place, Jesus must (as we have discussed earlier) be both God and Human. Here we see once again the centrality of Christology for other areas of Bonhoeffer's theology. Christ is really and truly present for Bonhoeffer, not only through the church's *kerygma*, as word, nor only through the sacrament of the eucharist, but also through the community of the church.<sup>33</sup> Christ must be fully present at all times for Bonhoeffer, who says that: 'All theology and all Christology condemn themselves if they do not say right from the beginning that God and Christ can only be Christ *pro-me*.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Feil, "Historical Survey of Bonhoeffer's Christology," in *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 74.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 314.

It is through Christ's presence as a figure of history, but also as one who is present now, that Christ becomes a mediator. Ernst Feil considers it 'basic to Bonhoeffer's theology'<sup>35</sup> that Christ is at the centre of not just theology but history; that Christ stands in the place where we should (and shall be).<sup>36</sup> Christ becomes the boundary – beyond human existence, and yet *for* human existence (*pro-me*). Clifford Green breaks down into more specific terms how Christ figures as 'present' for Bonhoeffer in word, sacrament and the church.<sup>37</sup>

Christ is present in word by way of the church's proclamation or kerygma. Thus for Bonhoeffer, encounters with others in the church demonstrate the presence of Christ in word, as Word. Christ is therefore 'present as person in the other'.<sup>38</sup> Christ is present through proclamation of the word. Where for Barth the written word becomes the Logos at its proclamation, for Bonhoeffer, the Logos is shown to be present by its proclamation at the pulpit.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the presence of Christ in the eucharist, Bonhoeffer sees the preached Word as the way in which the divine Logos reaches that of the human, and the sacrament as the way in which the divine Logos reaches our human nature.<sup>40</sup> And while it is the same Christ in both word and sacrament, it is a corporeal Christ in the sacrament and a verbal Christ in the proclamation. However for Green, despite natural elements of bread, of water, and of wine being used in the sacrament, Bonhoeffer shows a distrust of natural theology which had been perverted by the *Deutsche Christen*. While the *Deutsche Christen* argued that the two kingdoms (the Kingdom of the World and the Kingdom of Heaven) were separate, and thus the secular world was not accountable to the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>41</sup>, Bonhoeffer preferred to talk instead of Christ and Christ at the centre.<sup>42</sup> To this end, he then is careful to avoid

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<sup>35</sup> Feil, in *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 75.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Green, in *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas W. Strieter, "Two Kingdoms and Governances Thinking for Today's World," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16, no. 1 (1989).

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, 110.



any comparisons between the blood of Christ and the 'pure blood' of Nazi doctrine. Regardless, Bonhoeffer finds himself discussing Luther's doctrine of ubiquity. It is important for Bonhoeffer that Christ remains present everywhere. He uses the word 'repletive', by which he means a thing that is present in every place but unable to be measured anywhere: 'This is the way in which Christ is present. He is everywhere, and yet we cannot get hold of him.'<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer here departs from Luther. For Luther, Christ can be present everywhere – but in the eucharist he is only present if he wants to be. For Bonhoeffer, he is in the sacrament by virtue of his being as Christ, as the humiliated God and Human.<sup>44</sup> There is a real sense in which Christ *must* be present in the sacrament, because of his ontic reality.

Green has a brief note on the sacrament of baptism, which is marginal to our discussion of Christ's presence, but is apropos of our discussions of Bonhoeffer against his Nazi counterparts. With the adoption of the Aryan Clause, by which non-Aryans were barred from public service and by extension ministry in the established church, Barth argued that these churches ceased to be Christian churches.<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer was in agreement. For Bonhoeffer, anyone who was baptised was baptised into the same catholic church, and so a Jewish Christian excluded from the church would be excluded in 'violation of the sacrament'.<sup>46</sup>

This brings us to Bonhoeffer's thinking on the presence of Christ in the ecclesia. Green stresses that this is not in fact a third way of Christ's presence, but rather the nature of Christ as present, socially, in word and sacrament.<sup>47</sup> So we see that Christ's presence is central for Bonhoeffer. Not only was Christ present as an historical being, but he remains present in all times and places, beyond our human existence, as a boundary. Finally, Christ is present in word and sacrament – both as the proclaimed word, and within the eucharist – not in the same sense as Luther. For Bonhoeffer, Christ is *always*

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<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 321.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>45</sup> Jordan J. Ballor, "The Aryan Clause, the Confessing Church, and the Ecumenical Movement: Barth and Bonhoeffer on Natural Theology, 1933-1935," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>46</sup> Green, in *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality*, 219.

<sup>47</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 219-20.

present everywhere, but immeasurable anywhere, whereas for Luther, Christ is present in the eucharist only when he so chooses to be.

### 3: Christ's Humility is in Opposition to his Exaltation

Our final denial is related to Christ's humility – for Bonhoeffer, the humiliated Christ is the same as the exalted Christ. There is no contradiction, but a dialectic. There are several issues to be explored here. Bonhoeffer affirms that any statement of Christ as the humiliated one does not place limitations on his divinity. 'To be humiliated does not mean to be more human and less God, and to be exalted does not mean to be more God and less human. Both in being humiliated and in being exalted, Jesus remains wholly human and wholly God.'<sup>48</sup> Christ in his crucifixion shows nothing of his divinity. We can almost read Mark 15:29-32 between the lines of Bonhoeffer's lecture: 'Save yourself, and come down from the cross!' [Mark 15:30 NRSV], 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.' [Mark 15:31b-32a NRSV]. For Bonhoeffer, the Christ on the cross is a human crying out to God. His humiliation is in fact his exaltation. In the incarnation, God is 'incognito'<sup>49</sup> and even the miracles pose no difficulty for Bonhoeffer in this regard. In fact he remains incognito to this day until the Parousia.<sup>50</sup> The resurrection becomes the ultimate display of Christ's exaltation. For Bonhoeffer, the point of connection at the centre of the dialectic is the empty tomb. Again affirming the resurrection, Bonhoeffer states that without an empty tomb there would be no ground for our faith.<sup>51</sup> Christ, as both God and Human must be both exulted and humiliated. And here Bonhoeffer completes his lecture, with the assertion that the church too must become humiliated. Against the *Deutsche Christen* Bonhoeffer exhorts the church to humility. Like Christ, he explains, the church can be both high and low<sup>52</sup> – but one gets the sense

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 359-60.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 360.

that Bonhoeffer is keenly aware of the lack of humility present in the established church of the *Deutsche Christen*.

Pangritz points out that for Bonhoeffer, Christ's offense, or his scandal, is not in the incarnation – in becoming human – but rather in his humiliation.<sup>53</sup> He draws attention to important link in Bonhoeffer between Christ's humiliation and that of the church. The established church in 1933 had failed in that regard. It was no longer humble.<sup>54</sup> For Bonhoeffer 'The silence of the church is silence before the Word'.<sup>55</sup> There is a sense in which the sufferings of the Jewish people under the Third Reich permeate Bonhoeffer's thinking. 'Only he who cries out for the Jews may also sing Gregorian.'<sup>56</sup>

For Bonhoeffer Christ as God cannot be separated from Christ as human, and his church must by necessity remain humiliated as long as Christ remains humiliated, incognito, before the Parousia. Since Jesus has chosen to remain, in a sense, incognito, the church must remain humiliated until Jesus returns 'in divine power and glory'.<sup>57</sup> It is difficult to read Bonhoeffer divorced from his historical context, as ultimately, he offers a scathing rebuke to the church that had refused to humble itself 'as the presence of Jesus Christ'.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's 1933 Lectures on Christology offer a glimpse into a very specific historical context. Behind the words one can read a critique of the established church as it drifted toward National Socialism. Above everything, there is a clear Christocentrism – all revolves around Christ. Christ is the centre of everything theological and secular, and so for Bonhoeffer there is no soteriology without first speaking of Christology. There is no eschatology without first dealing with Christology. While the Lectures are long, rich and deep, it was necessary to sketch out only three different 'denials',

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<sup>53</sup> Pangritz, in *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 138.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 300.

<sup>56</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in Woelfel, in *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary*, 248.

<sup>57</sup> Bonhoeffer, in *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 360.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

adopting the method of Christopher Morse. The three denials were firstly that 'Christ's claim to be the Word of God is a just claim'<sup>59</sup>. Here we see that Bonhoeffer adopts a confessional stance, that Jesus the man was truly God. Secondly, that Christ is not truly present in the here and now. There it was demonstrated that Bonhoeffer sees Christ present everywhere but measurable nowhere. He is present in Word and Sacrament, but here Bonhoeffer departs from Luther on the issue of ubiquity. Our final denial was that Christ's humiliation is in opposition to his exaltation, where it was explored that exaltation and humiliation are not opposing one another, but working as a dialectic with the empty tomb at the centre. But above all, Christ is at the very core of Bonhoeffer's thinking, and that in obedience to the revelation of God through the word: 'To speak of Christ is to be silent, and to be silent about Christ is to speak.'<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 300.

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