

Bonhoeffer as Ecological Theologian: Who Knew?

Summary of Lecture by Dr. Larry Rasmussen

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Every era has an overarching “work” and for Bonhoeffer it was to forge a renewed Christian faith and ministry in the face of fascism, decline of the West as a viable spiritual-moral entity, and the beginning of “post-modernity.” Though environmental issues per se were not on Bonhoeffer’s agenda, his writings express a profoundly earth-honoring theology. Several of his papers that support this theory.

1) 1932 “The Right to Self-Assertion”

Influenced by Ghandi, Bonhoeffer concludes there are two cosmological frameworks, each with a different political orientation.

A) One leads Bonhoeffer to what he understands as collective self-assertion, or active non-violence. It is resistance that is not passive.

B) The other, found in the rising fascism in Germany, Bonhoeffer understands as the Euro-American civilization’s “machine and war” ideology as the chief means of self-identity, self-assertion, and problem-solving.

Bonhoeffer concludes that this understanding is rooted in Western culture’s battle “to turn nature to its service. Human conquest of nature is the foundational theme of Euro-American history.

2) A 1932 address on first petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom Come.”

Bonhoeffer states only those who love both earth and God can truly believe in the Kingdom of God and therefore rightly pray this petition.

+ The temptation to an otherworldly Christianity leads to being Christian at the expense of the earth.

+ Bonhoeffer advocates a this-worldliness Christian faith that this must include consistent affirmation of the earth. “Only where earth is fully affirmed can its curse be seriously broken through and destroyed.”

3) 1929 in Barcelona as an intern: “The Foundations of Christian Ethics.”

Bonhoeffer states, “Earth remains our Mother as God remains our Father, and the Mother will not lay in the Father’s arms those who are not true to her.” This is followed by an interpretation of Song of Songs and a straightforward celebration of sensuous earthly love and love of earth as “the best Christological exposition.”

4) 1933 as a university professor: Lectures published as “Christ the Center.”

A) A Cosmic Christ in the center of humanity, history, and nature which forms us today in these places, both within and well beyond the church.

B) A Cosmic Christ in community where ordinary, everyday relationships are the form of Christ’s own presence.

Bonhoeffer’s Christ is incarnate God who ends up being the crucified God. The incarnation is both an “earth-ing” of God with human joys and rhythms of nature and the depths of suffering and distress.

Referring back to “Thy Kingdom Come” petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Bonhoeffer concludes “whoever evades the earth does not find God. Whoever loves God, loves God as Lord of the earth as it is.”

Bonhoeffer to tell his Berlin audience: “The hour in which the church today prays for the kingdom is one that forces the church, for good or ill, to

identify completely with the children of earth, to misery, to hunger, to death. . . in deepest solidarity with the world, a time of clenched teeth and trembling fist.”

5) 1937, a theological interpretation of Genesis to university students:
“Creation and Fall.”

Bonhoeffer, speaking about the mythical origins of the “Blood and Soil” and “a [destined] people” philosophy catching on in German nationalism and the churches, tells his audience:

+ It is God’s earth from which we are taken and from which we have and are “body.” We are bonded to earth. Body is the existence-form of spirit, as spirit is the existence-form of body.

For Bonhoeffer, to embrace earth is to lie unreservedly in life as it is given to us and land in the arms of an earth-loving, incarnate God. It is to embrace God and be embraced by God, the suffering God who knows Earth’s distress.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What do you consider to be our “Great Work” on behalf of the church today?
- 2) What do you think should be or could be the relationship between church and state as we grapple with issues of war and peace, environmental concerns, and cultural differences in understanding humanity’s role in and responsibility for creation?
- 3) Do you agree with Bonhoeffer’s conclusion that the orientation of Western civilization has been “to turn nature to its service.” How does this impact faith and our understanding of our ourselves as created in the image of the creator?
- 4) Bonhoeffer states only those who love both earth and God can truly believe in the Kingdom of God and therefore rightly pray this petition. How would you incorporate this understanding of the petition in your own teaching about the Lord’s Prayer?
- 5) “Body is the existence-form of spirit, as spirit is the existence-form of body.” How do you understand the connection between physical or material with spiritual or not material existence? How does this influence

our priorities and personal choices in use of resources and care of creation?

- 6) For Bonhoeffer, to embrace earth is to lie unreservedly in life as it is given to us and land in the arms of an earth-loving, incarnate God. How might this idea be understood in your ministry context? Could it become a call to action on behalf of creation?