

## **Bonhoeffer on Science and Religion**

Summary of Lecture by Dr. Larry Rasmussen  
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Today both science and religion are enmeshed in volatile moral and social issues which result in social conflict. Scientific research has become politicized and scientists are subject to having their work submitted for ideological inspection. Scientific reports that are out of order with current political thinking are ignored, buried, or challenged.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was significantly influenced by his older brother, Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, a renowned scientist in Germany. Both cared personally and deeply about the moral horror they saw around them. Both, patriotic Germans, accepted guilt and responsibility for their nation's crimes.

Karl-Friedrich, born 1899, was 7 when Dietrich and his twin sister were born. He served in World War I with his brother Walter, who died in the war. After the war Karl-Friedrich became an internationally famous physical chemist, working on the hydrogen molecule. He stopped this work when suspected it could be used to develop weapons of mass destruction.

He was working in electrochemistry at the outbreak of World War II. His Institute in Leipzig was heavily bombed. He returned to Berlin after the war to be with family.

A righteous gentile, he harbored Jews at the institute to the end of the war. His focus was not on how he could extricate himself from the Nazi Germany around him, but rather how he should live for the sake of future generations and a new Germany.

Dietrich and Karl-Friedrich had a warm, light-hearted relationship which included serious academic exchanges. Karl-Friedrich wrote Dietrich regularly while the later was imprisoned.

Bonhoeffer's perennial question, "Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today" and his focus on an earth-bound orientation stems from his close connections with his brother-the-scientist and their father, Karl Bonhoeffer.

In a letter from Dietrich to his brother from prison, he says:

"I am now reading with greatest interest Weizsaecker's book [*On the World-View of Physics*]. . . How wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap for the incompleteness of our knowledge. . . We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don't know. . . That is true for the relationship between God and scientific knowledge."

D. Bonhoeffer's religion and theology are deeply, if indirectly, informed by the agnostic scientists in his family who were moral icons for him.

Karl-Friedrich traveled with Dietrich on two trips to the United States: 1930 – 31 when Dietrich was at Union Seminary, New York City and again for a brief return visit there in 1939. Karl-Friedrich turned down a professorship at Harvard on the first trip. On the second one he turned down a teaching position in Chicago.

Both brothers were greatly influenced by the 1930 – 31 trip to New York as evidenced in letters between the two:

Dietrich to Karl-Friedrich on the topic of racism. Dietrich writes about Albert "Frank" Fisher, an African-American student at Union who got Dietrich involved in ministry in Harlem. He observes that "the race question" seems to be

“arriving at a turning point” and wonders if “the ‘black Christ’ has to be led into the field against the ‘white Christ.’”

Karl-Friedrich replies:

“I’m delighted you have the opportunity of studying the Negro question so thoroughly. I had the impression when I was over there that it is really *the* problem, at any rate for people with a conscience and, when I was offered an appointment at Harvard, it was a very basic reason for my disinclination to go to America for good, because I did not want either to take on that legacy myself or to pass it on to my hypothetical children. It seems impossible to see the right way to tackle the problem.”

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer “the race question” is central to the church’s essence and ministry. How “otherness” is apprehended and lived is *the* crucial issue for “community,” which is the very form of Christ’s presence among us. Bonhoeffer maintains that Jesus is “the person for others” and the church is only the church when it is the church for others. In light of what later happens in Germany, he means that when the church does *not* take its stand with and for others, the church forfeits its essence *as* church and abdicates its ministry.

#### Questions for Discussion

- 1) In your opinion, what is the proper relationship between scientific research and faith in the intangible and unknown?
- 2) How does science influence faith? How does faith influence science?
- 3) Are there examples in our culture of people of high moral integrity who are also scientists who are expected to compromise their integrity? What might we do to support these people?

- 4) Karl-Friedrich harbored Jews during the Nazi era. Who among us needs a safe harbor today?
- 5) “We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know. . . That is true for the relationship between God and scientific knowledge.” Do you agree or disagree with the statement of Bonhoeffer’s? Why or why not?
- 6) For Dietrich Bonhoeffer “the race question” is central to the church’s essence and ministry. What would you consider to be *the* issue that is central to the church’s essence and ministry in our culture today?