



# Bonhoeffer's Theology of Resistance in the Context of Global Justice

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**Abstract**— *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German philosopher and theologian who lived during the Nazi Germany era, was a “lone voice in the wilderness” whose work on the theology of sociality advocated for a community which he calls the “visible community” and was “beyond all earthly ties”. In the Nazi Germany context, it ran counter current to the German nationalist propaganda of the volk which had aggressively made its way into all aspects of the German society including the church. Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality opens up the possibility of Christianity as not merely a religious institution but a movement towards inclusivity. The study of Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality becomes significant in formulating a new concept of community for contemporary times. The foundation of communities formed along earthly ties whether be it religious, political, cultural, social and in our context caste or ethnic almost always inevitably turn into oppressive powers. This radical demand of renunciation of earthly ties, yet the call to live for the sake of the ‘neighbour’ and to bear the ‘cost of discipleship’ is counter-intuitive to contemporary individualistic and consumerist impulses, which therefore opens up the question of how one is to live in the modern world in the face of modern powers. This opens up the possibility of exploring the relationship between the individual and the community and the ethical responsibility that this community must fulfil towards the oppressed and the suffering. In the context of global justice, an understanding of Bonhoeffer’s theology of sociality offers the articulation of an inclusive community that does not discriminate or oppress.*

**Keywords**— *Global Justice, Inclusive Communities, Sociality, Theology*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German philosopher and theologian during the Nazi Germany era, was a lone voice in the wilderness whose work on the theology of sociality advocated for a community which he calls the “visible community” and was beyond all earthly ties. Bonhoeffer was a man who stood in the gap in his resistance to the Third Reich even as theologians like himself turned their support to Hitler alongside the German National church becoming instrumental in the rise of Hitler to power. In my paper, I would like to discuss how his theology of sociality and his understanding of community is important in understanding his ethics of resistance, which I hope will enable us to articulate Bonhoeffer’s theology of resistance as one that is inclusive in its fight for rights in the context of global justice. Bonhoeffer’s idea of community as beyond “earthly ties” is congruent with concerns of global justice where the emphasis is on “individual human beings as of primary

concern and seek to give an account of what fairness among such agents involves” (Brock, 2022).

In the antisemitic Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer’s theology of resistance ran counter current to the German nationalist propaganda of the *volk* which had aggressively made its way into all aspects of the German society including the church. An example is the discriminatory regulation passed in 1933 the Third Reich that excluded non-Aryans and Jews from holding official positions or become members of German establishments and organizations including the church. In the same year, Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed the importance of this matter and tried to convince the fledgling church opposition that it should be concerned for both Jewish Christians and all others persecuted under Nazi racial laws. Bonhoeffer felt that the Aryan paragraph was strongly opposed to the truth

of the Gospel that he called upon Christians to leave the church if the "Aryan paragraph" were adopted—a call that found little response, even from Karl Barth the theologian associated with the Barmen Declaration. (Barnett, 1992, p.127). In response to the Aryan Paragraph, Bonhoeffer writes the "Theses on "The Aryan Paragraph in the Church"" in the summer of 1933, where he categorically responds and debunks the fallacy and untruth it harbours. He rejects race as the determining factor of the unity and composition of the church as implied by the exclusionary law. He writes, "By putting up the racial law at the door to the church community, the church is doing exactly what the Jewish Christian church was doing until Paul came" (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 426).

### Bonhoeffer's Ethic of Resistance

Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality is an integral aspect of his ethics of resistance and one must look at the way he defines social relationships, especially the "I-You" relationship to understand the ethical responsibility the "I" has towards the other. The person, for Bonhoeffer, is constituted above all by the ethical responsibility that arises in encounter and conflict with the will of the other person. Interestingly for Bonhoeffer, the 'Christian person' can exist only in relation to the divine and to the 'other' that he encounters (Bonhoeffer, 2009b, p. 51). The existence of the person therefore is dependent on the vertical and horizontal relationships, therefore making its existence possible and meaningful only in relation to the other, thus bringing in the inevitable nature of sociality within the community of Christ. Bonhoeffer argues in *Sanctorum Communio* that the individual 'I' is not negated in the community of Christ. Rather, "social relations must be understood, then, as purely interpersonal and building on his uniqueness and separateness of persons" (Bonhoeffer, 2009b, p. 55). "The person does not exist timelessly; a person is not static, but dynamic. The person exists always and in ethical responsibility" (Bonhoeffer, 2009b, p. 48). The existence of the 'person' is conditional upon the existence of the other.

In the discussion on freedom, Bonhoeffer's emphasis is on how freedom makes sense only in relation to the other. He writes,

"In the language of the Bible, freedom is not something man has for himself but something he has for others. No man is free "as such," that is, in a vacuum, in the way that he may be musical, intelligent or blind as such. Freedom is not a quality of man, nor is it an ability, a capacity, a kind of being that somehow flares up in him. Anyone investigating man to discover freedom finds nothing of it. Why? because freedom is not a quality which can be revealed—it is not a

possession, a presence, an object, nor is it a form for existence—but a relationship and nothing else. In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons. Being free means "being free for the other," because the other has bound me to him. Only in relationship with the other am I free." (Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 37)

One of the earliest and the most significant contribution that Bonhoeffer made in terms of calling out the German church as the Fuhrer was taking control of Germany was an essay titled "The Church and the Question Concerning the Jews" in 1933 where he justifies the role of the church's intervention if the state turns tyrannical, especially in the context of how Jewish citizens were being treated by the Nazi state. In this essay, Bonhoeffer posits the much-debated question of the relationship between the state and the church. According to Bonhoeffer, there are three actions that the church can take vis-à-vis the state and this forms the basis of his ethics of his resistance. The church can take action by:

First, questioning the state as to the legitimate state character of its actions, that is, making the state responsible for what it does. Second is service to the victims of the state's actions. The church has an unconditional obligation towards the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community... This would form the framework of his ethics of resistance in terms of being responsible for the others at an individual as well as community level. These are both ways in which the church, in its freedom, conducts itself in the interest of a free state. In times when the laws are changing, the church may under no circumstances neglect either of these duties. The third possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself. Such an action would be direct political action on part of the church. (Bonhoeffer, 2009a, p. 365)

Bonhoeffer was also deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi in formulating a pacifist ethics of resistance. He was a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent efforts in India's struggle for independence. There are several evidence of Bonhoeffer's intentions to visit India to learn from the Great Mahatma about Satyagraha and non-violence. In a letter that Bonhoeffer writes to Mahatma Gandhi on October 17, 1934, he laments the contemporary state of affairs in Germany while critiquing the turn that Christianity has taken in the West, and looks to Gandhi for direction towards a non-violent resistance, which Bonhoeffer felt was the solution to what

he calls "racial peace". He looks to Gandhi for guidance in the face of failure of the Western civilization's abandonment of the truth:

What we need therefore in our countries is a truly spiritual living Christian peace movement. Western Christianity must be reborn on the Sermon on the Mount and here is the crucial point why I am writing to you. From all I know about you and your work after having studied your books and your movement for a few years, I feel we western Christians should try to learn from you, what realisation of faith means, what a life devoted to political and racial peace can attain. If there is anywhere a visible outline towards such attainments, than I see it in your movement. I know, of course, you are not a baptised Christian, but the people whose faith Jesus praised mostly did not belong to the official Church at that time either. (Green, 2021, p. 119)

Green (2021) contends that Bonhoeffer was already on his way to thinking about an ethics of resistance as early as the beginning of 1930s against the rise of National Socialism and was deeply aware that contemporary Christianity of the West no longer and mournfully writes to Gandhi that while acknowledging the Christianity can offer a solution to the crisis in Europe and at home, he mournfully remarks that "Christianity must be something very different from what it has become in these days" (p. 119). For Bonhoeffer, Gandhi's movement was already living the community that exists for others. Not only that, he found in Gandhi's non-violent resistance, the actualisation of the Sermon on the Mount, the basis of what he calls "costly discipleship". In line with what Jean Lassere's idea of the Sermon on the Mount that it is not only an ideal but to be lived out in the real world, Bonhoeffer sees in Gandhi, its praxis being materialised. The connection between Gandhi and Bonhoeffer runs deeper in their embrace of the Sermon on the Mount as a blueprint for their pacifism. Gandhi would often refer to the Sermon on the Mount as a passage that exemplified Christ as "the greatest teacher of mankind." ("Gandhi's Original Letter")

In *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer emphasises on the importance of "loving the neighbour" in concrete terms as an extension of what he calls the call/ purpose of the community of Christ. He moves away from abstract expressions of religiosity and instead calls for concrete social and political action:

The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave

needs freedom. It would be blasphemy against God and our neighbor to leave the hungry unfed while saying that God is closest to those in deepest need. (Bonhoeffer, 2005, p. 97)

As Cooper (2021) aptly summarises Bonhoeffer's concept of discipleship, "Bonhoeffer is not shy in moving away from the abstraction of most ethics. Instead, he pushes hard for the concrete reality modeled in the life of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount. For Bonhoeffer, Jesus provides an example of being willing to stand in the gap for humanity and vicariously act on the part of others for the common good (p. 8).

In conclusion, I would like to look at some implications of Bonhoeffer's ethics of resistance and how may it hold relevance in the contemporary context in thinking about Global Justice. One, because of the accommodative and inclusive nature, Bonhoeffer clearly subverts the conventional understanding and definition of power and might. As he writes in *Life Together*,

"In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of fellowship." (Bonhoeffer, 1954, p.94)

This forms the remarkable basis of his ethics of resistance which inevitably ran countercurrent to the antisemitic and the volk propaganda in his context and in our context, defines our moral and ethical responsibility to what is considered as "weak", "underprivileged" or "unwanted". Reggie Williams noted, "Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem demonstrates that a Christian interpretation of the way of Jesus must be connected to justice for a Christian to see beyond primary loyalties to self and kind, to recognize the needs for justice in another's context, and to 'love neighbor as self.'" (as cited in Cooper, 2021, p.19).

Second, his ethics of resistance is important for contemporary civil societies because of how Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance allows for space to resist against powers and structures that have become tyrannical.

Third, Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance loudly calls out to the apathy of the state towards oppressed citizens. Not only that, his call to social and political action

especially for the church to intervene when the state fails out to carry out its duties, as a natural outflow of its character, opens up the possibility of safeguarding the interest of the other.

Fourth, Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality and ethics of resistance offer an argument against narrow, ultra-nationalistic tendencies much like Germany under Hitler. As is evident from his ethics of resistance, Bonhoeffer also advocates for looking out for the welfare and justice of everyone everywhere regardless of their prescribed identities.

In our context, Bonhoeffer has been a major source of inspiration to protest against states which acts in a tyrannical manner. The Clergy Emergency League instituted in 2020 in the wake of institutionalized discrimination against Black people groups in America is one such example. Along Bonhoeffer's theology of resistance, the objective of the CEL reads, "The Clergy Emergency League (CEL) is a grassroots network of clergy speaking with a unified voice against the abuses of power at the federal, state, and local levels. We repudiate the fusion of politics with radical, right-wing, fundamentalist Christianity. And we denounce the growing power of racist white nationalism and a militarized police state" (*Clergy Emergency League*, n.d.).

Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality opens up the possibility of Christianity as not merely a religious institution but a movement towards inclusivity. The study of Bonhoeffer's theology of sociality becomes significant in formulating a new concept of community for contemporary times. This radical demand of renunciation of earthly ties, yet the call to live for the sake of the 'neighbour' and to bear the 'cost of discipleship' is counter-intuitive to contemporary individualistic and consumerist impulses, which therefore opens up the question of how one is to live in the modern world in the face of modern powers. This opens up the possibility of exploring the relationship between the individual and the community and the ethical responsibility that this community must fulfil towards the oppressed and the suffering.

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