

# A teleological interpretation of Bonhoeffer's concept of "A World Come of Age"

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## Abstract

This paper explores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of "the nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms in a world come of age," best known from his *Letters and Papers from Prison (LPP)*. As a case study of its possibilities, we will survey South African thinkers who have explored the concept in rapidly changing contexts. Our leading question is whether academic theology can develop a teleological narrative for a nation that has "come of age." When a nation or culture becomes so secular that it "outgrows" a traditional use of biblical terms, can those terms be reinterpreted to provide a teleological narrative for the nation? Bonhoeffer can be a resource for academic theologians to address issues in public theology, especially the suffering and oppression of communities still in pain despite a democratic system.

## KEYWORDS

Christology, new theology, other-worldliness, teleological narrative, this-worldliness

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Fascination with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and thought continues to grow among theologians and churches. His work with the Confessing Church movement and his thoughts on secularization, discipleship, confession, spirituality, and ethics seem more pertinent with each decade after his execution by the Nazis in 1945. But bringing the gospel to bear on any post-WWII nation's sense of identity and purpose is complicated. We focus on South Africa as a kind of test case for Bonhoeffer's proposals. Many other nations are (or aspire to be) come of age. But South Africa's theologians have struggled actively for perspective on "liberal theology" (as traditionally understood) as against the currently emerging "interpretive"<sup>1</sup> theology for today's "new" political conundrums. Nations with prob-

lems like any of South Africa's (e.g., imperialist legacies, denials of human rights, pressures for and against democracy, civil violence, poverty) must also ask teleological questions.<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer's thought could be a resource for them as it has for many South African thinkers.

To capture the tenor of the "non-religious interpretation" of Bonhoeffer's theology, it is appropriate to start with the last year of Bonhoeffer's life—his stay in prison. For most of his career, Bonhoeffer's leading question was "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" However, his Christological development belongs mainly to earlier years, and there is a consensus that his Christology remains not only incomplete but also unresolved. If we focus on Bonhoeffer's "prison" theology rather than his earlier Christology, we can more easily see an important shift in his thinking. Bonhoeffer realized that the academic approach to

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theology had to demonstrate its relevance, as did the Christian's place in a Westernized world, in "a world come of age," confronted by a "religionless Christianity." In his prison letters, Bonhoeffer is concerned with the tangibility, mobility, and visible power of the gospel in the midst of tempestuous historical change. Moreover, Bonhoeffer longed for a better social position of the individual, and even a greater concern for the position the church would take toward this "new" society. Bonhoeffer's great dream was a Germany becoming free from totalitarian ruthlessness, anti-Semitism, and bourgeois fascism as Nazism was overcome.

With the brilliance of his writing and preaching and the selflessness of his deeds, Bonhoeffer is a great resource for our own teleological thinking. Many South African theologians envisaged a future South Africa free from racism, prospering as apartheid declined. Some projected a new unity, a (liberal) theology based on democracy. Sadly, years later, one has to ask whether this longed-for unity crumbled under parasitic societies or demagogues. Have we lost the tangibility, mobility, and visible power of the gospel (the message of freedom) in lieu of democracy? Has our ideology of the gospel become an anachronism? Bonhoeffer was not afraid to ask such questions. His frank response toward the church's indolence should be a reminder that the church can exist as the church only if it exists for the sake of others.

We move now to the major topics in our discussion. First, I offer an explanation to the following question: Why the need for a teleological interpretation? My field of interest is the teleological response of academia to our current socio-economic dilemma in contrast to Bonhoeffer's theological response to his dilemma. I argue, if seen teleologically our focus on moral systems in South Africa should be characterized primarily by a focus on the consequences of the permissible actions our current regime evoked—to the detriment of the disenfranchised. I deduce that the current regime did not make correct moral choices, which are consequential to our current situation of malady and corruption in South Africa. I infer in this paper that our present regime lacks a proper moral compass to make the right choices for those who are still disenfranchised by our democratic regime. There needs to be a response like Bonhoeffer's who was incensed by injustice and petitioned the church to respond to and resist injustice.

Second, I offer a detailed preamble to the phrase "the *non-religious interpretation* of biblical concepts in a *world coming of age*." This is necessary because it gives us scholars insight into Bonhoeffer's theological idea on "a *world come of age*" as often referred to by Eberhard Bethge as Bonhoeffer's "new theology." In addition, it will allow us to engage with the notion of teleology in relation to Bonhoeffer's "new theology." In this paper, I infer that Bonhoeffer's

idea of "a *world come of age*" is based on his Christological concerns as to who Christ is for us today and who He remains throughout the ages. The examination of this idea "world come of age" I evaluate as both a theological and sociological phenomenon that can be explained teleologically; more so I do not render a critique on religion but set out to answer the question: Who is Christ in a *world come of age*?

Third, I offer a detailed exposition of Bonhoeffer's own perspective on the provocative phrases he coins in his *LPP* (2010). We will examine his prison theology in congruence with the contemporary situation in South Africa, particularly with the themes of "non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts in a world coming of age," "religionless Christianity," "a world come of age," and the "theology of the cross."

Fourth, I would propose a *reinterpretation* of "a world come of age" as understood by academic theologians in South African context. Bonhoeffer's ever-daunting Christological question "Who is Jesus Christ for us Today?" becomes "What shape does Christ—as presented through academic theology—take in our democratic South Africa?" What should Christ's followers do in a South Africa moving toward extreme secularism and plagued by racism and feelings of revenge against the former oppressor? What is their duty in the face of farm attacks and other injustices against South Africans of every age group and gender?

Fifth, this paper reviews the *dichotomy of narratives* described by Eberhard Bethge (1967b) in his account of Bonhoeffer's *New Theology*. (See his definitive biography of Bonhoeffer, Bethge, 2000, pp. 853–891, and R. Gregor Smith's collection *World Come of Age*, 1967.) The dichotomy arises from theologians' disagreement over a perceived shift in Bonhoeffer's theological standpoint. Some go to the extreme of disregarding his theology before prison. In this paper, we regard the shift as the maturing of a Christian in the journey of life. We maintain that a 39-year-old facing impending death has a deeper grasp of the world than one with untested optimism who earned his doctorate in theology when he was only 21. Comparing these narratives not just demonstrates the variety of expositions on Bonhoeffer's thought, it explains a certain nostalgia in some South African academic theologians. Inspired by Bonhoeffer's theology, they declared boldly, "Yes, we are of use today."

Lastly, this paper surveys the influence of Bonhoeffer's "this-worldly" interpretation of the Gospel. South African theologians' efforts at "the nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms in a world come of age" has led over the years to a new theological anthropology, one that invigorates a religious imagination for social responsibility. We will see how the religious challenges of a "South Africa come of age" have been bound up with a socially

activist (re)interpretation of Christology. In 1997, Barry Harvey anticipated our 21st-century complexity: “One of the ironies in this our South African situation is that while academic theology no longer controls the modern regime, they are in large part responsible for creating it, not only in practice, but in theory as well” (Harvey, 1997, p. 326).

Exploring these topics will, we hope, add clarity and conviction to our sense of scholarly and social mission. The conscientious re-evaluation of theology has always been the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—the place on which the church stands or falls. The same is true for academic theology in South Africa.

## 2 | PART 1: EXPLANATION TO QUESTION: WHY THE NEED FOR A TELEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION?

In observing the current socio-economic dilemma in South Africa, and looking at the suffering of *others*, there is a need to discern the cause and effect of suffering in a South African democratic society. Mazur (2018, p. 5) suggests that when doing the aforementioned “we are generally not looking for causal explanations of how this actually came about, but rather, it is usually the teleological version of “why?”—a search for the purpose of the suffering—that we find ourselves asking.” In our current attested social construct in South Africa this paper explores Bonhoeffer’s teleological ethics in a theological construct that co-exists with his theory of morality. This is derived from duty or moral obligation that is good or desirable as an end to be achieved for *others*.

What then is a teleological interpretation? By definition, teleology offers an account of purposive or goal-directed activity. This activity can also be interpreted as an ethical task related to *others*. Although ethical theories and moral practices present us with a number of “characteristics of actions” that places a limitation on our teleological duties it can also generate a “maximum amount of good to prevent injury to *others*” (Dyck, 1968, pp. 530, 531). This presupposition by Dyck accentuates Bonhoeffer’s concept of being the “man [woman] for *others*,” which highlights our measure of responsibility toward *others*. Huber’s (1993, 586) structural measures of responsibility state that the “ethics of responsibility has to be understood basically as a teleological ethics.” In fact, Huber (1993, p. 582) infers that “responsibility is not simply and not exclusively—as is the tendency in Bonhoeffer’s description—an ‘existence for *others*,’ or proexistence. It is a prospective care for a natural, social, and cultural space to which the responsible person herself belongs.” Lam (2020, p. 82) corroborates the aforesaid that “the human *come of age* can only live between the dialectic of dependence (on Jesus Christ) and responsibility (for *others*).”

Consequently, there is a need to evoke the memories and past sentiments of Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, a South African theologian who once said at the Commission of Inquiry into South African Council of Churches (1983, 4358) that we need to seek out an idea that looks “for a peaceful way of bringing about pressure on those in authority, to try to change a system that has brought untold misery and suffering to people.” Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu expressed that “there are two kinds of suffering; there is a suffering which is purposeless, such as the suffering that our people are undergoing at the present time [during Apartheid], and there would be a suffering that is teleological, a suffering that has a goal, and would bring to an end this misery of our people” (p. 4358). The goal therefore in this paper is to direct academic theologians toward redemptive activity, a teleological order with “an active tendency toward redemption, in the divine causality, which is discernible in Christ’s consciousness and ‘helpful actions,’ and also in the influence of Christ’s consciousness transmitted from person to person” with a liberating effect (Adams, 2011, p. 459).

The teleological view of Bonhoeffer’s corpus was researched periodically by scholars. Himes (2015, p. 13) suggests that “the teleological view interprets the later works, which contain Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on worldliness and religionless Christianity.” Himes (2015, p. 13) affirms that teleological interpreters mainly “focused on Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*”. The aforementioned corpus presents us with Bonhoeffer’s “teleological ethics” especially in what way we “establish how actions have consequences and how these actions are judged by the actions moral position” (Ahlin, 2021, p. 23). The moral obligation of the church is not to be dissident and be compromised by standing “at the boundaries of human thought and existence” and “where human powers give out” but in the “middle of the village” [Bonhoeffer, 2008, p. 282] by working for the good of all humans (Bouma-Prediger, 1984, p. 140).

## 3 | PART 2: PREAMBLE TO THE PHRASE “THE NON-RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL CONCEPTS IN A WORLD COMING OF AGE”

Scholars argue that Bonhoeffer’s phrase is a criticism against the “reconfiguration of the church’s practice of everyday life” that takes place at several levels, in “which the expansion and consolidation of power that takes place as the world comes of age may be accurately displayed” (Harvey, 1992, p. 45). In fact, God is removed “from its teleological context within the social anatomy of the church” and “reinscribed” into modernity (Harvey, 1992, p. 45).

Huber (1992, p. 5) speculates that “the whole of his [Bonhoeffer’s] literary work is directed towards issues related to the specific structures of modernity” in relation to this phrase—a world without God. This phrase “is not a withdrawal from the [Bonhoeffer’s] theological argument” but an unfolding of the “theology of incarnation as a radical theology of the cross” (Huber, 1992, p. 13). To put it in simple terms, modernity “has exposed a world come of age to an unexpected light, showing that it is indeed godless, and thereby bringing it closer both to God’s judgment and God’s grace” (Harvey, 1992, p. 42). Harvey (1990, p. 49) suggests that “the type of worldliness that Bonhoeffer advocates begins with the recognition that the church needs to understand the world better than that world understands itself.” The church, theologians, and academics must ‘expose the polity and policies of the *pax moderna* to an unexpected light, demonstrating how the exclusive claim to our allegiance on the part of a world come of age directly conflicts with the crucified messiah[’s]’ message of community—a visible community in a world without God (Harvey, p. 49). Bonhoeffer saw the church precisely as “God’s hidden presence in the world come of age”, and the church’s actions coincide with the “way in which God acts in the world today”; God’s actions are only visible and interpretable inside the community (D’Isanto, p. 144). Therefore, for Harvey (1992, p. 55) this phrase represents

“... a subversive act of noncompliance with the hegemonic ordering of the (post)modern world (i.e., the church’s refusal to be confined to the margins, where it had been assigned in a world come of age), and a summons to return to the center of the human village”.

Besides Bethge’s posthumous view of the phrase “*a world come of age*” there are a varied number of scholars who interpret this phrase differently. Urbaniak (2014, p. 458) points out that Bonhoeffer’s idea of a world coming of age “does not reside in the critique of religion” but focuses rather on his “Christological question (What shape does Christ take in our world?) and its ecclesiological implications (How does the church, the community of disciples founded in Christ’s name, make itself manifest in the midst of the world come of age?).” Harvey (1997, p. 324) suggests that the phrase “*world come of age*” is “fiction in the literal sense of the term: a historically constituted set of techniques, social roles, and institutions that, in its efficient anonymity, is both the instrument *and* effect of secular human intelligence and artifice.” In fact, for Harvey (1997, p. 322) Bonhoeffer recognized that in a “*world come of age*” there is the “need to preserve and foster those practices and conversations that constitute the church as a distinc-

tive polity in the midst of a world caught in the throes of arrested adolescence”. Lindsay (2011, p. 297) suggests that the “adulthood of the world”—the world, that is, that has “come of age”—is a world that in fact refuses to allow the question of God to be confused with any particular stage or form of human religiosity. It is also a world that refuses any longer to accept the type of God that is all-too-often proposed by religious people when they come to the end of their own cognitive abilities.

My assumption is that a Bonhoeffer scholar should recognize the phrase “*world come of age*” as part of the broader phrase coined by Bonhoeffer, namely, “the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts in a *world coming of age*” and the different interpretations and loosely translation thereof—“Christianity without religion in an adult world.” Prenter (1967a, p. 98) responds that this phrase “is meant primarily to express the relation of God’s revelation to the world come of age” and since interpreters are so “deeply involved in the “religious” interpretation of Christianity, this other interpretation is so difficult a thing to accomplish.” Prenter expresses that “the religious interpretation of Christianity seeks precisely to salvage a place for Christianity in the modern world” (Prenter, 1967a, p. 99). In addition, Bonhoeffer associates God’s coming into the world with “God’s suffering on account of the world” and man’s participation “in God’s revelation—faith—is more than specifically religious acts which belong to a sphere of inwardness, but finds expression in a suffering being for others in the life of the world” (Prenter, 1967a, p. 99). With regards to “God’s suffering on account of the world” Hamilton (1967, p. 155) adds that “God allows himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross”; and the idea “*world come of age*” can be “seen as the world in which God suffers.” Hamilton (1967, p. 158) infers that Bonhoeffer’s phrase starts “with a plea for worldliness, move to a demand for a non-religious interpretation of Christianity, move on to a description of the *world come of age*, and conclude with a description of the life of the Christian today as a participation in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world.” Hamilton’s assumption is that Bonhoeffer brings to bear that God in his powerlessness does help humankind by winning power and space in this world; and it is only through this lens that we can come to the aid of the weak and disenfranchised. More so the message of the “cross is concerned with a genuine encounter between the church under the cross and the *world come of age*,” in other words, “the world is only of age when it is faced with the church of the cross, and the church is only the church of the cross when it is faced with the *world come of age*” (see Prenter, 1967b, p. 175). Further interpretations of the challenging phrase “*world come of age*” suggested that Bonhoeffer’s letters written in prison formed “the centre of an optimistic way of thinking—not as endangered

and threatened, but in its legitimate autonomy—and the description of apostasy and degeneration seems an illegitimate apologetic”; likewise his letters questioned “modern man’s evaluation” of a *world coming of age*, and changed “the religious response” not in the critique of religion but on the Christological question: What shape does Christ take on in our world come of age? (see Forrester, 1964; Muller, 1956).

With regards to the phrase “*the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts in a world coming of age*” it could be argued that Bonhoeffer’s best friend Eberhard Bethge offered the best insight and interpretation of their prison correspondence. Bethge implies that in this phrase “we find an example in Bonhoeffer’s last Christological answer of what such a program might be: non-metaphysical, non-individualistic, non-sectorial, against the establishment of religious privileges, against the *Deus ex machina*, and against guardianship” (Bethge, 1967a, p. 77). It was during his time of imprisonment that Bonhoeffer “tried to show how a Christianity of a post-religious if not totally religionless century would come on the scene at the close of a declining and heavily compromised religious epoch” (Bethge, 1967c, p. 8). Bethge suggests Bonhoeffer conceived this phrase “*coming of age*” as “not the sum total of all those men who have reached maturity, but a living declaration, a necessary risk in granting what, in an irreversible process of adolescence, each man and group deserves” (Bethge, 1967a, p. 68).

In summation this leads us to the critical question: When a nation or culture becomes so secular that it “outgrows” a traditional use of biblical terms, can those terms be reinterpreted to provide a different narrative? Bethge (1967c, p. 9) suggests for change to occur “the form and supports of the life of faith would have to change in such a way as to take man seriously in his *coming of age* and to foster rather than thwart his emancipation.” This change goes hand in hand with “personal responsibility and actualization, the outworking of Christ’s liberating power being man’s own free decision ‘to live and suffer for others’” (Bethge (1967c, p. 9). The most important implication of Bonhoeffer’s phrase “a nonreligious interpretation of the biblical message in a world come of age” implies “that through Christ we arrive at a free decision to be [there] for others” (Bethge (1967c, p. 9).

#### 4 | PART 3: EXPOSITION OF BONHOEFFER’S PHRASES: RELIGIONLESS CHRISTIANITY, A WORLD COME OF AGE, AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

This section offers a detailed exposition of Bonhoeffer’s own perspective as he unpacks his “new theology” he con-

ceived in his *LPP* (2010). We will examine his perspective in congruence with the contemporary situation in South Africa, particularly engaging with the themes he develops. In South Africa during the 1990s Bonhoeffer’s liberal theology and provocative phrases sparked interest and in 1996 the 7th International Bonhoeffer Congress was hosted in Cape Town, where South African scholars involved in the fight against apartheid concerned themselves with Bonhoeffer’s question “Are we still of any use?” and addressed his contribution to the church’s political engagement and the relevance of his theology in South Africa.

Our major interest in Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” in this paper is indeed not only sparked by an apparent change in his thinking but a change in his understanding of theology—not so much his ecclesiology but how to appropriate contemporary academic theology. For Bonhoeffer, academic theology cannot be a remote entity from the church in the same way that liberal theology had been practiced before that time. Bonhoeffer also changed his thinking on the role of Christianity, namely, from an established religion to a participatory religion in Germany that could speak on behalf of a church whose understanding of church was not just marginal, but would lose its voice after the war. Bonhoeffer also envisaged the embodiment of a community of the cross as participatory, with a tangible presence. His thinking on the church’s mandate changed almost drastically while in prison.

For our purposes in this paper the idea of a change in the church’s mandate is best reflected in Bonhoeffer’s radical *LPP* which reflects his understanding of how church and world, that is, church, academic theology and society are related in “a world come of age.” Our argument in this section is guided by Bonhoeffer’s Christocentric elements in *LLP*. We argue that his Christology guides his “new theology” since an apparent aspect stands out in his prison letters, that is, the well-known concern, “who is Christ actually for us, today?” (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 362). This aspect is important for our paper since it is the locus from which we can further develop a narrative around Bonhoeffer’s provocative phrases with regard to Jesus Christ as the center of religion. In addition, if we approach Bonhoeffer’s prison letters from “how can Christ become Lord of the religionless as well?” then this vantage point of assumption could lead us to the core of Bonhoeffer’s theology and Christology; and possibly unveil the gist of his “religionless Christianity” in his letters (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 363). This view sets the background for our discussion on themes on “religionless Christianity,” a “world come of age,” and the theology of the cross, in Bonhoeffer’s prison writings.

The letters we chose are in no specific order but are all relevant to this paper, as they contain Bonhoeffer’s theological viewpoints. We start with a letter dated April 30, 1994, which shares his primary concern:

"What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words—whether with theological or with pious words—is past, as is the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age" (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 362).

Bonhoeffer asked this question of skepticism within the context of what he calls "religionless" Christianity. Consequently, further questions remain: How is Bonhoeffer's theology influenced by his disillusionment? Does his Christology change because of his emphasis on the shift or expulsion of God from the world by God becoming human in Jesus Christ? If God becomes human what happens to His transcendence?

In his notes to Bethge (I, Tegel, July–August 1944), Bonhoeffer asserts that, "the expulsion of God from the world is the discrediting of religion living without God [and yet] Christianity [can only] arise out of the encounter with a concrete human being: Jesus—the perfect human form. [This is the] experience of transcendence" (Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 490). This particular area of the "being of transcendence" dealt with leads to the conclusion that in this letter (April 30, 1944), Bonhoeffer framed the idea of "transcendence" around the idea, "who Jesus Christ is for us today." Given this impression that Bonhoeffer uses the aspect of transcendence to reinterpret what is immanent, I infer that Bonhoeffer does not abandon his earlier theological paradigms but presents a different perspective on God's transcendence in response to Germany's current political situation and the church's response to it. For Bonhoeffer transcendence is what guards us against worldliness and allows us to see God and the world in a new light, instead of seeing God as just another name for the world. For Bonhoeffer transcendence becomes both a theological and a cultural phenomenon that affects religion—a position which he assumes in his prison correspondence. Bonhoeffer's theological formulation did not evolve only from life experiences, particularly his involvement in the *Abwehr*, but also from new theological processing while being incarcerated.

For Bonhoeffer transcendence is never identified with empirical human reality. The reality of God is always realized in the revelation of Christ, the transcendent one; and since Germany had lost the idea of who Christ was, the "human for others," and replaced Him with other-worldliness, the transcendent consequentially disappeared from their reality. Bonhoeffer implies that God has disappeared from their (the Church in Germany's) midst. If understood like this Bonhoeffer's explanation of transcendence in *LPP* depicts a clear perception that he viewed transcendence from a new theological perspective, that God is still the beyond in the midst of our lives and revealed as Christ, the "human for others."

Bonhoeffer exemplifies the aforementioned idea in a letter dated July 21, 1944, in which he explores an idea not only relevant to trace his Christology but specifically Jesus Christ's humanity. Bonhoeffer asserts that "in the last few years I have come to know and understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a *homo religious* but simply a human being, in the same way that Jesus was a human being" (:Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 485). For Bonhoeffer Christians share in Christ's humanity. Bonhoeffer held that the profundity of "this-worldliness of Christianity" shows that there is no significant difference between our humanity and the humanity of Jesus (see :Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 485). The profundity of "this-worldliness of Christianity" is not an ordinary this-worldliness "but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes and the ever-present knowledge" of Jesus Christ's "death and resurrection" as a human (see :Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 485). Jesus existed as a human being; therefore, He could relate to the human condition. The value of life (this-worldliness) becomes meaningful, Bonhoeffer stresses,

... if one has completely renounced making something of oneself [and] one throws oneself completely into the arms of God, ... this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life (DBWE 8:486).

As academic theologians we should be able to exist and live "fully in the midst of life" and present a theology defined in terms of our current social struggle for a just society and government in South Africa; and echo once again "yes, we are still of use."

## 5 | PART 4: REINTERPRETING A "WORLD COME OF AGE" FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

What do we believe presently as South African academic theologians? Are we as effective as our predecessors at stimulating intellectual responsibility in South African universities? Some would argue that we are not. Years ago, they claim, academic theology adopted a "contextual theology"—a theology as an option for the poor. This theology was defined in terms of the social struggle for a just society and government—set against political and socio-economic oppression from apartheid. This conviction set the stage for many activists from different theologies. In 1970, for example, Basil Moore used a university stratagem to start discussions on Black Theology. This theology sought to protect South Africans against racism and sought a "contextual theology" that could bring

dignity through political and church liberation. Moore succeeded, and the 1970s marked the spread of a theology that rapidly influenced churches and theological institutions.

The influences of contextual theologies carried on into the 1980s with publication of the *Kairos Document* mobilizing churches to protest against apartheid. During the 1990s theologians like Charles Villa-Vicencio and Desmond Tutu were focused on resisting apartheid, relatedly advocating reconstruction theology and a theology of forgiveness. This paved the way for democracy, a rebuilding of South Africa to give all races a voice in the affairs of the Republic. Advocates of a reconstructive theology were strong advocates against racism—as a result of their actions it evoked strong theologies.

But decades later, the reforms they worked for have been undermined. The spirit of reconciliation advocated by theologians has been brushed aside. Desmond Tutu himself often condemned the current regime, likening it to the pre-existing Apartheid regime. So, what is our responsibility as theologians now? Some claim that we lost our zeal for justice and instead sought intellectual conviction. Academic theologians were satisfied to act intellectually and academically, unaware that the language of theology could never become the language of the poor and marginalized people. Themes like “liberal theology” and “public theology” lacked the power to make the dream of democracy a reality to all. We still have a long way in our country to translate the dream of democracy to a reality, which can be experienced by all citizens.

If we fear to articulate the evils of our time, then we have not learned anything from Bonhoeffer’s life and example. There is still a need to develop a theology that engages the post-apartheid government’s accountability for basic human rights and needs. Many post-apartheid theologians are experiencing an extreme case of otherworldly and intellectual isolation. This was not the case with Bonhoeffer. When he was isolated from academic theology and the intellectual world in a lonely cell in Tegel, he responded differently. In prison, Bonhoeffer’s concern for the German church’s tolerance for the ideas perpetrated by Nazism grew intensely. His fundamental discontent was with the church. He demanded that the church come out of its stagnation and “get back out into the fresh air of intellectual discourse with the world.” The church will “have to risk saying controversial things, if that will stir up discussion of the important issues in life” (see Bonhoeffer, 2010, p. 498).

For Bonhoeffer, the lonely “prison cell” experience evoked new interpretative theological realizations, chiefly that this-worldly involvement of the church and academic theology existed to protect the weak and defenseless. Thus, South African faith-based organizations and academic theology must be able to survive the post-apartheid trappings

of socio-economic inequality, racial prejudice, and its “perceived” callousness toward a culture of corruption and violence. The problem should no longer be the white upper-class minority, as we would like it to be, or the new upper-class black elite but rather the government’s callous silence toward corruption, its willingness to perpetuate unfair practices against those longing for a better life in a just and democratic society. Gutierrez (1973) argues In *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), that a contemporary theology must continually interpret historical experiences and that true interpretation is achieved only in (a current) historical praxis. Otherwise, it is a false theology.

To illustrate a “this-worldly” theology for “a world come of age,” I refer briefly to former South African theologians, university professors and activists such as Beyers Naudé of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Desmond Tutu, an Anglican Archbishop, Dr. Allan Boesak of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), and John de Gruchy, a university professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Scholar-activists like these assented to theologies of liberation for the formation of a new South Africa. For them, the biblical narrative becomes teleological. Even their broad view of humanity is teleological, stressing that human life has a purpose regardless of race.

Within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) tradition, renowned activist Beyers Naudé reinterpreted his theology by calling Afrikaner Calvinists back to the “real Calvin.” His article in *The Rand Daily Mail* (April 29, 1969), “What Calvin Really Stood For,” re-evaluated John Calvin’s teaching as DRC tradition had understood it. Naudé argued that Calvin would condemn the racial domination embodied in the DRC interpretation of diversity. This argument helped create a process of reconciliation within the DRC, which later evolved into a national apology for the heresy of apartheid.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s—Dr Allan Boesak (2015) of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) declared apartheid a heresy. In his book *Black and reformed: apartheid, liberation, and the Calvinist tradition* (Boesak, 2015), Boesak reinterpreted his theology by depicting a teleological narrative of apartheid. He often characterized apartheid in several ways by calling the struggle against apartheid an oppressive and exploitive economic system—a struggle for the authenticity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This preempted an admission of wrongdoing and willingness to pave the way for a new cohesive theology within DRC to prepare for democracy.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu put his theology into action by convening the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).<sup>3</sup> John W. de Gruchy wrote *The Church Struggle in South Africa* to expose the church’s struggle

within the context of apartheid. De Gruchy insisted that the DRC should confess guilt in the same way as the Confessing Church in Germany. Churches in South Africa had accepted or abetted racism, apartheid, and oppression. For De Gruchy, confession meant not only admitting wrongs but working toward reparation and further commitment to change.

Many prominent South African theologians played a dynamic role in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980, eight theological professors of the Dutch Reformed Church produced a Reformation Day Declaration that called on church members to criticize apartheid and end it in the DRC. In 1981, the collection *Stormkompas* (“Storm Compass”) followed with more anti-apartheid essays as well as a list of Barmen-type theses. It aimed to guide the churches through political climate change in the National Party government. (See Meiring, 2007, pp. 155–156.) Dr. Piet Meiring was one of the editors and a member of the TRC. De Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio’s (1983) collection *Apartheid Is a Heresy* made a thorough analysis of the heresy debate on apartheid. In 1984, Dirk Smit’s article “A *status confessionis* in South Africa?” argued that an “acknowledgement of a *status confessionis* in [South Africa] was a final cry from the heart to be heard and to be taken seriously” (Smit, 1984, pp. 12, 32). De Gruchy’s (1984) book *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue*, outlined the relevance of Bonhoeffer’s theology for South African society. Anthonissen (1993) in his doctoral thesis *Die geloofwaardigheid van die kerk in die teologie van Dietrich Bonhoeffer* investigated the credibility of the church in its social and ethical influence. Botman (1994) in his doctoral thesis *Theology as transformation? Towards a Theology of Transformation* extended the call for churches to change the nation. Blei’s (1994) book *Apartheid as a status confessionis* developed a new theology around the condemnation of apartheid as a heresy. The list goes on. Ben Marais, Bennie Keet, David Bosch, Nico Smith, Willie Jonker, Jaap Durand, David Botha, and many others were also pioneers in anti-apartheid academic theology.

But now, only two decades later, what became of this courageous scholarly spirit and the courageous response of churches to it? We face a visible need for a theology relevant to the challenges of our own time, in which collusion with corruption has become the norm. My paper argues that moral regeneration cannot be left to politicians. Theologians should once again show ways to make a new and just society within the democratic dispensation. How? We turn now to the importance of promoting a new narrative that will help bring a true democracy. It must be a narrative shaped by academic theology embedded in the gospel—a narrative that is willing to offer a reinterpretation of “a world [South Africa] come of age”—set against oppression

in the wake of the current socio-economic situation in a liberated South Africa.

## 6 | PART 5: THE DICHOTOMY OF NARRATIVES

Ironically, we have to search “theological” archives to locate the old “gospel” narrative and to formulate a “new theology” for an era that scorns basic human rights. The original “gospel” narrative, after all, once liberated people. In Ronald Gregor Smith’s collection, *World Come of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1967), several theologians (including Bethge, Barth, and Bultmann) analyze Bonhoeffer’s interpretive narrative and struggle to reclaim it. Each writer attempts a “new theology,” we might say, using Bonhoeffer’s narrative to develop their own for their own circumstances.

Of particular interest here is Eberhard Bethge’s contribution, *The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Theology* (Bethge, Smith, 1967).<sup>4</sup> In it, Bethge explores Bonhoeffer’s “new theology” as it developed over the years. Bonhoeffer’s beacon was always his Christology, but his narrative centered on Christ as the Lord, not as the object of a religion. Then, at the climax of his Christological development, the crises in Nazi Germany and German churches equipped him to formulate a new narrative theology. As Bethge puts it, when Bonhoeffer’s own church “dropped out of the first battle line”—resistance to Nazism—he feared its clinging to an unthinking conservatism (Bethge, Smith, 1967, p.75). He saluted Barth for distinguishing “religion” from faith (Bethge, Smith, 1967, p.76). In this sense, says Bethge, “religion means human activities to reach the beyond, the postulate of a deity in order to get help and protection if wanted” (Bethge, Smith, 1967, p.75). Like Bonhoeffer, we can learn both from “liberal” theology and traditional theology. And like him, we must bring a fresh scrutiny to Church, theology, and religious practice in our own homeland.

As our theologians construct a narrative for a South African context, our ongoing interest in politics and unfair government policies must be grounded in our Christology “from below” and our understanding of transcendence. As we follow Bonhoeffer’s primary question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” we must not treat the new narrative as a sprucing-up of business as usual. “One might prefer to stay in the familiarly mapped-out homeland of inherited Christianity of good ‘behaviour in this world’,” says Bethge, or to have “a deposit of ready-made answers to the questions raised, a settled knowledge applicable for use in the pulpit, maybe a dictionary for the ‘non-religious interpretation’.” But there is not such a dictionary” (66).

Bonhoeffer offers us a clear and concrete theology of transformation. We still need to find a radical change to our theology specifically in its language and orientation for our democracy tainted by corruption and our socio-economic maladies in South Africa. Bonhoeffer's conception of witnessing for God confronts academe (especially its theologians) on how to articulate two ever-daunting challenges: How can we speak of God without conventional religion? How can we speak in a secular way about God in a South Africa that has come of age?

## 7 | PART 6: AN APPRAISAL OF A "SOUTH AFRICA COME OF AGE"

As a leading thinker in the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer sought theological foundations for its rejection of the Aryan Paragraph and its condemnation of church compromises on the Jewish Question. As Barker explains, the theology behind these declarations led naturally to a new confessional statement (Barker, 2009, p. 378).

"The church in Germany created a *status confessionis* [...] to state as clearly as possible its beliefs in the face of heretical claims that would distort the church's message. That meant, ultimately, drawing distinctions between what might be believed in general and what were the specific teachings, beliefs, and practices of the Christian community" (Barker, 2009, p. 368).

Today in South Africa, do we ourselves need a new *status confessionis*?<sup>5</sup> In 1982, a church in South Africa responded to Apartheid with a Christian statement of belief, namely, the *Belhar Confession*, adopted in 1986 as a *status confessionis* by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC). In 1985, the *Kairos Document* was issued by black South African theologians to challenge the churches' response to the atrocious policies of Apartheid. This statement was crucial in establishing a platform for liberation theology (a theology from "below") in the South African theological academy.

In formulating a new *status confessionis* for our own times, two challenges stand out. First, we must interpret Scripture faithfully by embracing a this-worldly doctrine from "below" rather than from "above"—or finding an amalgamation. Second, our 21st-century South African "university" theologians and their successors must be willing to re-evaluate interpreting scripture in light of liberal theology.

Meiring's paper *Bonhoeffer in South Africa: role model and prophet* show the necessity for our predecessors to demand a *status confessionis* against the heresy of apartheid (2007,p.159). But what about those who come after us? Astute as Meiring's observations are, our starting point is different than what he projected. We have

to attempt more than simple revalidation of "democracy," namely the democracy brought about by "liberal" theology. We must validate a new confession—one brought about by radical change in our theology and a renewed mission to witness for God in a democratic society. This new confession must state publicly that our present regime's indifferent actions should be declared a sin; that their moral and theological justification of their actions is a travesty of the gospel; that their actions is in blatant disobedience to the word of God; and their theological deviation has grown into a new heresy with blatant disregard for democracy.

For us to speak so boldly, we need for our fellow South African citizens to acknowledge our duty as academic theologians. We need their assent that our new situation in South Africa justifies its theologians' call for a *status confessionis* and a confession of Christ against the heresy created in a postliberal theological context. This confession must both accompany and effect social change that is visible to all South Africans. We must succeed like our predecessors who vehemently advocated radical change from Apartheid to real Democracy.

### 7.1 | Calling for a new *status confessionis*

The call for a new *status confessionis* is not unfamiliar to the church and to academic theologians. In the 16th century, it was a term for a popular form of Lutheran doctrinal debate (centered on "a particular doctrine that is essential to which we are as a church"). A modern example occurred in 1982 when the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) met in Ottawa, Canada. A group of black pastors refused to take communion with white pastors because of apartheid enforced and condoned by churches in South Africa. The WARC declared a *status confessionis* and suspended the South African member churches that were practicing racial separation. These actions at WARC rallied the West and "the churches of the world fell in behind the protesting South African churches, in alliance with students, labor unions, and even the armed resistance" (Braverman, 2019, p. 22). Our South African conception of a *status confessionis* was shaped by the Christian West form of democracy that eventually led to our synthesis of democracy. Dutch Reformed South African Theologian Dirk J. Smit came to a similar conclusion. In Smit's description of *status confessionis* he often concludes that *confessionis* is not a political statement but rather a theological statement. Henriksson reflects on the demands of the WARC's *status confessionis* recognizing that although "strong in one sense", the *status confessionis* was "much weaker regarding the need for action as a necessary consequence of the theological reflection than the voices now coming to

the fore in South Africa—from below” (Henriksson, 2010, p. 113).

Bearing this in mind, if we consider a call for a new *status confessionis* we must first distinguish among different kinds of confession, that is, church dogmatic or politico. Secondly, we need to determine our point of intersection. Are we going to emphasize the social position of the church or social position of the individual? In which social context of theology are we going to place our *status confessionis*? During pre-1994s South African theologians developed relevant doctrines to formulate a *status confessionis* specifically suited for apartheid in a South African context. But in our own time, apartheid has transformed itself into the disguise of democracy. Under this disguise, the weak are still being mistreated and have become the aggregate disenfranchised and marginalized people of a democratic society.

Bonhoeffer's theology calls for a different approach to deal with the weak and the disenfranchised. If we profess to faithfully confess the gospel, we must affirm that academic theologians exist as the hands and eyes of Jesus not only for marginalized people but for people marginalized in a democratic society. Theologians exist to transform the reality of the incarnate Christ as the man that exists for others. The incarnation demands that theology move from the traditional “other worldly” interpretation of the gospel to a “this worldly” interpretation of the gospel. As Rustenburg (1962, p. 24) asserts, “The incarnation is the great and central manifestation of the divine world-acceptance. Here, I would say, is the heart of all biblical this-worldliness; we now not only accept the world, we enjoy it, because we know the gospel.”

## 8 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kierkegaard offered an understanding of the relation of God to “other-worldliness” as opposed to “this-worldliness” and was often accused of devaluing this world. But Dietrich Bonhoeffer interpreted “other-worldliness” quite differently. He perceived early in his academic career that spiritual “other-worldliness” actually requires us to exist as Christians in this world. “This-worldliness”—a Christian engagement with the world as it is—is required in ministering to any society that has “come of age.” Isaac Rottenberg (1962) affirmed that,

[i]f the world is going to learn a new other-worldliness through the witness of the church, many more Christian congregations will first have to learn how to be more worldly in a Christian way. ... [T]he incarnation, what-

ever else it may mean, expresses the divine solidarity with a lost world. In Jesus Christ God has identified himself with the needs and the sufferings of man. How shall a Christian fellowship identify itself with the surrounding world in an involvement of compassion, and thus, through God's Spirit, be used as a transforming force in the world? (30).

Rottenberg sums up bluntly: “We do so much talking at the world, but we have difficulty finding a way of *being* in the world—*being with* the world” (32).

Sixty years later, Rottenberg's criticism still stings. Among academic theologians, our “this-worldly” interpretation of the “gospel” seems to result mainly in conferences, and publications on such issues as ecumenism, woman and gender equity, same sex marriage, gay priest ordinations, virtue ethics, and eco-theology. Now, how should we grade ourselves as public theologians? Are we only talking at the world or actually being with the world? Do all these topics bring out our compassion and ministry? Even if society finds them “relevant,” do these topics convey the full gist of the “gospel” message? Are these really the narratives that we need to construct?

What would Bonhoeffer say if he observed the order of our day in our universities and the engagement of unfair practices in South Africa? In our honest *appraisal* what does a “South Africa come of age” look and sound like set against Bonhoeffer's ever daunting Christological question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” or presently “What shape does Christ—especially through academic theology—take in our democratic South Africa?” Supposedly the war against apartheid was won, but every day's avalanche of news shows the rich and ambitious sharing its spoils—and many academics looking away. Theologians in the academy must refuse these spoils and refuse to be silent, speaking out against a democracy that took hostage our “gospel” narrative from the poor and discarded it as inept. We must be militant in our discourse against injustice and decay, calling our nations to a new way of life to confront our circumstances. If the narrative of this paper rings true, then it calls us to a serious reinterpretation of academic theologian's interpretation of Scripture, thereby to formulate a new and authentic “gospel” narrative. As academic theologians we should seriously reconsider: Are we still of any worth to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's “nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms” in a democratic South Africa come of age?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Skip Bell (2012, p. 39) observes that, “If one believes life is thus divided [theory-to-practice assumption], the prevailing premise in theological education works. But if one reflects seriously on the

question of meaning within life as it happens, an organic interpretive theology is needed [and] forming pastors for the inevitable engagement of interpretive theology takes on an urgent tone when culture is critiqued. Humans are looking outside of religious institutions for spirituality. Meaning-making captivated by theologically compartmentalized tradition distinct from life experience is approached with suspicion.”

<sup>2</sup>Teleological questions that are directly linked to our ethical theory of morality – that derives moral obligation from what is good or desirable as an end to be achieved – opposed to a deontological response as an ethical duty considered solely on duty and individual rights.

<sup>3</sup>This Commission was set up by the Mandela government in 1996, 2 years after the 1994 democratic elections, to look into the atrocities of the past in order to move forward as a nation through the means of reconciliation and forgiveness.

<sup>4</sup>The essay compiles Bethge’s Aldin Tuthill Lectures at Chicago Theological Seminary in January 1961. Here we use the revised version reprinted in R. G. Smith’s collection *World Come of Age*, 1967.

<sup>5</sup>The Latin term *status confessionis* means the stance of a witness summoned to testify. In the 20th century the term acquired the technical sense among Protestants of a binding doctrinal stance on sociopolitical questions (BRILL).

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