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The *constant* reality beyond exception and rule in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology¹

ABSTRACT

Due to the many warnings at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic of an increased transfer of power to governments and the subsequent impending demise of democracy, this article presents a theological response to a persistent theory of autocratic power. Employing, but reinterpreting the semantics of the concepts of the jurist and theorist of state Carl Schmitt, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer redirects the former's rhetoric regarding history, rule, nothingness, creation ex nihilo and miracle. As a result, Bonhoeffer responds to a secular method with faith in Christ's cross and provides for a reality that can serve as a constant grounding for a new life carried by ultimate hope.

1. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, within weeks of the first lockdown due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, a host of articles and books appeared (Agamben 2020a, 2020b; Mehring 2020; Žižek, 2020) from both sides of the political spectrum which warned, and sometimes welcomed, that governments would use this occasion to seize authoritarian powers with emergency laws. Subsequently – so the prediction went – governments would permanently hold on to such authoritarian gains and in so doing, would erode democracy. Partly as a reflection, and



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partly as a reply to such scenarios, I will proceed in the following from a short historiographical sojourn to a globally persistent theory of individual human power that was originally developed by the jurist Carl Schmitt and continues to be used by autocratic systems and dictatorships. Lastly, I will turn to outlining Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Protestant Christian response that dismantles this destructive political theory with a different source of rule that is trustworthy and, most of all, consistent.

2. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SOJOURN

In world history, there have been many instances of pandemics, wars, food insecurity, supply-chain failures, economic depression and inflation. As single or combined grounds for cesuras or breaks with familiar circumstances, this produces problems for the single human being as well as for their collective organisations. Obliterated is that which is commonly perceived as *the normal*, destroyed is the security of the present and confidence in the future. Such upheavals change the form and scope of control over the personal, *own* situation, but at the same time may lead to raising the controls over the single and collective other.

In 19th century central Europe, a persistent drought, combined with large-scale deficiencies in food distribution, fanned in German-speaking countries a revolutionary unrest that had earlier taken hold in neighboring France and was based on the *ideas of 1789*. Despite the revolution's failure in Germany in 1848, the indirect consequences led in the following decades to the first republican constitution and inaugurated in 1919 the Weimar Constitution, a first attempt at liberal democracy in the period between the First and the Second World Wars. This inter-war period of the early 20th century was not short of its share of crises, namely the outbreak of Spanish Flu, the optimism of economic liberalism crashing into a hyper-inflation with staggeringly high unemployment, a global market crash causing the Great Depression, and the rise of autocratic, totalitarian regimes. Finally, the post-World War Two democratic constitution for Germany, the 1949 Basic Law, incorporated the basic liberal rights that were already formulated in 1848. Today, Germany and many other democratic states are confronted with the above-mentioned warnings that are rooted in contemporary crises with similar causes of those of the past: a pandemic, problems of food distribution, wars, inflation, and additionally, millions of climate refugees.

Almost incomprehensible is the devastation, sorrow, helplessness, fear and suffering that may result on a collective or individual level from the mentioned circumstances defy comprehension. But astonishingly, even though collective structures may dissolve and individual hopes and dreams may dissipate, such catastrophic times, also create relationships and community, and foster

adaptability and resilience. As strange as it may sound, the Bubonic plague of the Middle Ages, in which almost half the population died, inaugurated, for those who were fortunate enough to survive and for the following generations, a period of intense optimism and joy of life which led to inventions, such as the printing press and to revision of existing economic and political theories. Moderate to extreme ideas appeared, ranging from the Franciscan and Dominican forms of monastic life to Machiavelli's scrupulous political theory and Hobbes' idea of the state of human nature and social contract theory.

During the so-called *age of crisis* in Europe in the early 20th century, Hegelian dialectics, historicism and the theory of progress relativised everything that was previously absolute and transposed such certainties into the sphere of relative human reason. After the initial enthusiasm of the Industrial Revolution gave way to disenchantment with technology in the period after the First World War, a *new human being* was searched for. This new *form* for the human being (*Gestalt*) was meant to incorporate a meaningful relation between human beings and science and ensure a life physically and mentally worth living. Despite accompanying fears and insecurities, this search for a *new normal* invigorated the arts, architecture, literature, film, theatre and music. Ideas of self-improvement flourished, which included Pilates, biodynamic agriculture and homeopathy² – trends that are re-emerging today. Philosophy produced the ideas of phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics and deconstruction. And political theory viewed various *forms* of sharing power democratically, but also entertained the possibilities of extremes, such as socialism, communism and fascism.

3. A PERSISTENT AUTOCRATIC THEORY OF INDIVIDUAL POWER: CARL SCHMITT'S THEORY AND METHOD

In search for a new stable *normal* within the crises of his times, the German constitutional lawyer Carl Schmitt introduced a theory that focused on implementing and enforcing an autocratic political programme on the right side of the political spectrum. He claimed that for the present secularised reality, his theory would overcome the gap of insecurity between the past and the future. Insisting on a strictly scholarly purpose, he grounded the modern state in a self-devised conceptual model of history and a sociological method, which in their combination were supposed to prove an affinity (Hollerich 2012:22) between theological or metaphysical perceptions on the one hand

2 Examples of the creative variety of this expression are the *Bauhaus* forms, *Gestalt* theory, cubism, Dadaism, the novel form of musical cabaret and the *Lebensform* (life reform) movement.

and political forms of rule on the other. He claimed to have been inspired by “a protestant theologian who had demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection” (Schmitt 2005:15). The protestant theologian Søren Kierkegaard, to whom Schmitt referred, had intended to expose the missing element of *movement* in Hegel’s rational system (Kierkegaard 2009) which claimed to lead with a synthesis out of thesis and anti-thesis to a human knowledge that is as absolute as God’s knowledge. Therefore, Kierkegaard, in a play on *Either-Or* (1959), had used the idea of stages for juxtaposing aesthetical selflessness with ethical commitment and showed that both failed in achieving the higher religious phase of existence. The aesthetics’ romantic reflection remains caught in possibility without actuality and the ethicist judge becomes stuck in eternal values and civic duty. Both are unable to use reason for moving on to the “absurd idea” of the paradoxical Christian faith in the God-human Jesus Christ, faith in the incarnated God. Therefore, for transfiguring the previous two stages, Kierkegaard insisted that the gap of paradox between unbelief and a relationship of faith in God requires a *leap* into faith (Come 1997:320-321). Schmitt, instead, claimed that in the contemporary era of secular modernity his concept of history, combined with a sociological method, could bridge the gap between the secular and the metaphysical in a way that is relevant for the modern state.

In Schmitt’s thought, history is a forward-moving trajectory through the ages on which societal conflict is neutralised and depoliticised at fairly regular intervals (Schmitt 2007:82-85). Such instances (*Augenblick*; Conrad 2008) of depoliticising neutralisations are for Schmitt moments of not only indifference, but more accurately, they are moments of “nothingness” (2005:3, 30, 66). In this empty “nothing”, a new social elite forms a central idea “from nothing”, *ex nihilo*. This new idea replaces the previous elite, as well as their now redundant intellectual domain (Schmitt 2007:81-82, 89-90). For establishing an affinity between the novel idea and the organisational form for this new domain, Schmitt supplements his historicist model with a “sociological method of analogies”. He compares various governmental forms as they appear on the trajectory of history at particular ages with the spiritual and intellectual central ideas that marked them. From this comparative combination of model and method, Schmitt gathers that each historic period develops an institutional order that corresponds to the prevailing central idea of that time period because it is immediately comprehensible to the people of that age (2005:35-46).

A moment of nothingness, of indifference, was, according to Schmitt, reached in the modern age of the 1920s at which “all significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularised theological concepts” (2005:36). Any normality had dissipated in the sense of having become neutralised and depoliticised. Therefore, in applying his model of history and sociological

method, a normality can only be re-established with a *rule (Regel)* that is confirmed by the exception because:

The normal proves nothing, the exception proves everything; *she confirms not only the rule, the rule lives only from the exception*. In the exception the power of the real life breaks through the crust of repetitive, rigid mechanism. (Schmitt, 2005:15; own translation, emphasis added)³.

In his argument, Schmitt connects the interrelation of institutional order, central idea and historical age or domain with a dynamic between normality and exception, based on entangling three possible meanings of the word *rule (Regel)* in a linguistic German word-game. One meaning of the word *rule* refers to *normal, regular (regulär)*, a further meaning attaches to *legal regulation, norm, law (juristische Regeln)* and lastly its meaning can be attributed to mean *regulating power or ruler (regelnde Herrschaft)*. Taking this into account, Schmitt is basically saying that the regulating power, the *ruler*, defines with the *rules* of normative law the *regularity* of normality. And this happens at that moment of exception when a “real life” – that is, a living human being – changes that which has lost its meaning in a crusty, rigid, mechanical repetitiveness. Therefore, in the modern age of uninspired, mechanised, industrialised monotony, characterised by capitalist economic “domination and utilisation of matter” (Schmitt 1996:13) which has reached on the forward-moving trajectory of history the moment of *nothingness*, a human being creates *ex nihilo* a new *ruling* normality.

Schmitt well understands that Kierkegaard meant with the exception, not a human being but Christ, who is breaking through in the human being’s life at the unexpected moment of personal crisis. However, by drawing an analogy between “miracle” and exception, Schmitt replaces the theological understanding of the former with a jurisprudential meaning (2005:36), which places the exception of the secular age not only apart from and unbound to the laws of nature, but also unbound to juristic laws or *rules*. The unbound exception is therefore for Schmitt more interesting than the normal case. And this exception of the secular age is, for Schmitt, a human being, a sovereign, a “real life” who decides not only that the moment of *nothingness* has been reached, but who follows this up with creating *ex nihilo* a new normality. This sovereign “who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 2005:5) represents this new normality to the people in analogy to the Catholic pope, who is in direct line since Jesus Christ authorized to represent the idea of Christ in

3 The German original reads: „Das Normale beweist nichts, die Ausnahme beweist alles; sie bestätigt nicht nur die Regel, die Regel lebt überhaupt nur von der Ausnahme. In der Ausnahme durchbricht die Kraft des wirklichen Lebens die Kruste einer in Wiederholung erstarrten Mechanik“ (Schmitt, 2004:21, emphasis added).

the form of dogma – that is, a content unified in a *complexio oppositorum* (Schmitt 1996:7). Therefore, the content of the new normality is the *rule* that the sovereign human *ruler* – the self-styled, significant personality who takes initiative outside of any *ruling* system, whether legal, political or otherwise – creates *ex nihilo* at the moment of historical *nothingness*.

4. THE PROMISED CONSISTENT FOUNDATION: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S THEOLOGY

The theological perspective of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a contemporary of Schmitt, differs decisively from the latter's theories, his model and method. Bonhoeffer's argument begins with criticising Kierkegaard for having laid

the foundation for an extreme sort of individualism in which the significance of the other for the single person is no longer absolute, but only relative (1998b:57).

For Bonhoeffer, any type of messianic figure who claims ultimate political authority and a political-messianic idea that heralds "the dawn of the fulfillment of ultimate hope" only "tries to become the idol" the followers were looking for in the first place (2009:278, 280). But such a dominant extreme individual is constantly at risk of losing the unconditional obedience of the followers, even though they had already abdicated their own rights and responsibilities. Bonhoeffer predicts, however, that once the humanity of this messianic, political figure is exposed, this misleading, unbound personality will fail and it will emerge that no responsible social structures of life have been built (2009:279-280).

Instead, Bonhoeffer clarifies that Jesus Christ, as witnessed in the church, is the "miracle" (2009:292-293, 359) and God is the creator and preserver of this world. Therefore:

It is a mystery of God's reign over the world that this very cross, the sign of Christ's failure in the world, can in turn lead to historical success; *this cannot be made into a rule*, though in the suffering of God's church-community it repeats itself here and there (Bonhoeffer 2005:90-91, emphasis added)⁴.

Bonhoeffer insists that on earth, at the time of history and relative reason, God's plan and rule does count. In a time of worldly insecurity, not a *rule*, a

4 The German original reads: „Daß dann gerade das Kreuz Christi, also sein Scheitern an der Welt, wiederum zum geschichtlichen Erfolg führt, ist ein Geheimnis des göttlichen Weltregiments, aus dem keine Regel gemacht werden kann, das sich aber in dem Leiden seiner Gemeinde hier und dort wiederholt“ (Bonhoeffer 1998a:78, emphasis added).

ruler – or a human sovereign, for that matter – can design an idea and manifest it as *regular*, normal, norm or law. Rather, a future for humanity is revealed in the cross of Christ, which will overcome “death, loneliness and desire” with resurrection, community and care for others (Bonhoeffer 2009:290, 293-294).

Underlying Bonhoeffer’s theological assertion is his understanding of history as clarified in his book, *Creation and Fall* (1997). Power and history are separated from the primeval history of humankind since humanity’s fall from God’s grace. The Fall, as described in the biblical story (Gn 3:3-24), is the “event at the beginning of history, before history, beyond history, and yet in history” (1997:82). At this event, Adam’s dominion over the Garden of Eden (1997:83) had transformed into the earthly dominion. The tree of life and the tree of knowledge were transposed from the middle of paradise to the middle of the reality of time on earth. As a curse and simultaneously as a promise (1997:131-136), the Fall foreshadows the Easter event, the cross of Jesus Christ. The human being’s wilful transgression of God’s prohibition of not eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge marked human sinfulness and, at the same instance, determined life’s limits. The tree of knowledge became the tree of death with the *nothingness* of death as its fruit. The *nothingness* of death endangered the tree of life (1997:89). This *nothingness* of death, which “is’ absolutely ‘nothing’” (1997:34), God placed into the middle of human existence in time and earthly reality. *Nothingness* is God’s primeval decision and a marker for the limit to human possibilities (1997:86). Human thinking becomes restricted and life becomes understood as preserved only until death (1997:139-140). In this earthly dominion of the anxiety-causing middle between the limits of natural birth and death, the human being acts as *sicut Deus*, acts *like God*. Within these limits, the human being acts out of its own ego and resources (1997:115) and as *if* knowing about good and evil and as *if* having no limits.

But in humankind’s state of death on earth (Bonhoeffer 1997:112), God in his grace hears the cries for life and promises that “the death of death never means *nothingness*” (1997:136, 143, emphasis added). God responds from eternity in the middle of time with the Easter event of Christ’s cross at which he atones for humanity’s sin. God in Jesus Christ, “entering into history and having to die within history” (Bonhoeffer 2009:326) – this messianic idea, this paradox – becomes the hidden centre of history and the middle of the human condition and human nature. Through faith in Christ’s cross, humanity is reconciled to the tree of life, freed from final death and called into a new life (Bonhoeffer 2005:158). It is God who upholds, it is God who preserves the fallen world and calls a new creation into life (Bonhoeffer 1997:141) at the cross of Christ, at the very moment of the most desolating *nothingness* of human life. Fulfilling his promise of new life, God in Christ – this messianic idea

of salvation – rescues humanity from *nothingness* and finishes, condemns and destroys claims made within relative history.

The very same instance of the cross, the instance of the fulfillment in historic time of God's promise from eternity, separates God's time from human time and therefore separates also God's revelation from human reason, Bonhoeffer claims in *Act and Being* (1996). Reason and revelation are two independent sources of knowledge. The rational human mind has no *a priori* insight into God's knowledge. Human reason remains without the God-initiated revelation enclosed in the ego and this-worldly circular thinking. Reason connects to that what is knowable through observations of nature and human life, while revelation is a trans-rational divine mystery (Bonhoeffer 2003:306). It is not possible for fallen, sinful humankind to connect with creative, philosophical or jurisprudential reasoning or method to the substance of God's true reality. God's creation *ex nihilo*, creation from *nothing*, remains the "utterly unique" (Bonhoeffer 1997:32) primeval beginning, the absolute beginning before time, before history. This *nothing* before and of creation belongs solely to God's domain and is inaccessible to the reason of human beings. When "God's word became history" (Bonhoeffer 1998b:143), it was God who broke, in the once-ness of Jesus and the fact of Christ's cross, the boundary to the rational human being and not the other way around. Because "God is love" (Bonhoeffer 2005:334-337), he self-reveals (Bonhoeffer 2009:315) in Jesus Christ's redeeming cross his love for his creation.

The essence of God's revelation, this self-revelation of his love for humankind (Bonhoeffer 2008:363), is a faith-content which differs from an only formal choice between obedience and disobedience. God's revealed love proclaims equal judgements and equal grace to human beings because all live on earth in an equally sinful state (Bonhoeffer 1998b:204-205). God's love for humanity is distributed in equal measure, despite the dissimilarity of humanity – that is, despite the multitude of and variety among human beings. "Based on the fact that *God is always the same*" (Bonhoeffer 1998b:205, emphasis in original), each human being is given an equal part in God's love; given is "to each his own" – *suum cuique* (Bonhoeffer 2005:181). God, the one who remains always the same, unchanging, constant, permanent "Real One" (2005:261-263) distributes to each human being always in an equal measure the "own" love, never the "same" love (2005:181-182). Although Bonhoeffer is not stating it directly, but exchanging in the translation of *suum cuique*, the word *own* with *same*, would draw the Divine, God, the One who *is always the same* (Bonhoeffer, 1998b:205) into the sphere of human distribution and power (Radler 2019:103). Bonhoeffer agrees, though, that it is the task of reason to defend this equal right to God's grace (Radler 2019:104). However, it is God who preserves and defends from any subjective arbitrariness this right to divine equal salvation against such laws, norms and *rules* that are

implemented by human beings with sovereign exceptions by an unbound *ruler* who forgets that the God-human is the “Real One” to legislate and judge in the court of God (Bonhoeffer 2005:184-185, 327-328). Not the content of the rules of sovereign exceptions, but the content of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and the cross provides the real equal, reliable and consistent foundation.

5. CONCLUSION: THE CONSTANT REALITY

Bonhoeffer acknowledges that a time at which all values are overturned thirsts for something final, ultimate, a constant ground that is beyond known banalities (Bonhoeffer 2008:358), a strength that can attend to the economic and social fault lines, a leader who sovereignly implements some quiet reprieve, a baseline that is secure and consistent, a resemblance of normality which one can trust for building on. Thus, the world thirsts for someone who claims to have the answers and is able to implement the *rules* for a new reality that creates prosperity and peace. But Bonhoeffer clarifies that salvation, security and a new life cannot be a man-made and a man-implemented *rule*, a norm, a law, a programme or an idea. To accept this kind of normality, made and implemented by a god-like human being, would mean a *rule* of domination and oppression that lives from the power of a human being’s claim to an exceptional status and to exceptional means which are, however, always exclusive and limited.

Bonhoeffer rejects a Hegelian kind of faith in unlimited possibilities of the human spirit within history that is directed towards reaching and even uniting with God and that attests to some godliness in the human being. A Schmittian separation of the appearance and the idea of Jesus Christ, which makes the appearance of a human being, a pope-like sovereign, a necessity for representing and implementing the human-made idea is, according to Bonhoeffer, the worst kind of heresy. This misses the incomprehensible, irreducible mystery of God’s incarnation in the middle of historic reality and turns his humanness into a comprehensible idea of human reason (Bonhoeffer 2009:332, 335-337). A new normality is not created *ex nihilo* by a human being beyond laws and accountability in the moment of *nothingness* between two ages and their elites on a forward-moving trajectory of history. Creation within history always remains only relative, provisional. Rather, creation *ex nihilo* belongs exclusively to God’s domain, which is beyond history, beyond the limited time of humanity and human reason. A new normality, a new life and security comes from divine salvation at the moment of the *nothingness* on Christ’s cross. A new normality forms from the hidden self-revelation of God’s Word of equal compassion, love and respect for humanity. The true *messianic idea* is God’s promise for preserving each human being in the *own* form and right. It is God’s incorruptible, permanent, unchanging, reliable promise that “repeats itself here and there” (Bonhoeffer 2005:91) many times over because

God is a consistent and constant presence. New life, a new normal, a new normality is promised by the One who is always *the same* – the reliable God who, as *constant reality*, provides in the reality of this world, not exceptional *rules*, but a revealed content for a much-needed baseline for a *normality* of real strength, resilience and hope.

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