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## NAZISM AND THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION – THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century and his popularity goes beyond theology. As a theologian he is associated mainly with his concept of non – religious Christianity, vastly popular in Anglo-Saxon countries in the sixties. Those who are engaged in charismatic movements know him as the author of *Nachfolge* (Eng. *Discipleship*) and *Gemeinsames Leben* (*Life together Prayerbook of the Bible*), both presenting rules of Christian life and relationships within the Christian community with outstanding intuition. For an average man is Bonhoeffer a Lutheran priest who participated in resistance against Hitlerism, which cost him his life. This fact in biography makes him a kind of an icon, especially in Germany. A number of publications, monuments, schools carrying his name, TV and radio programmes bear witness to it. Bonhoeffer is one among a few theologians whose biographies were immortalised on screen. However he didn't begin his combat against the Nazi State with his participation in resistance. It was proceeded by his journalistic and pastoral activity, in which he revised Lutheran social science accusing his contemporary church of distorting the idea of the Protestant Reformation. From large numbers of sermons and lectures emerged an ecclesiological and theological analysis of politics that ought to be treated as an integral part of Bonhoeffer's theology. This gave an opportunity to formulate a theory about the relationship between the state and the church which became a "road map" of activity in Nazi-State conditions for a small church opposition and for Bonhoeffer himself.

### 1. POLITICAL THEORY IN THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

The Lutheran interpretation of the relationship between the church and the state is often treated as one of the most important sources of the church's infirmity and even a collaboration of German Christianity and the Nazi-State. An author of an excellent Bonhoeffer's biography, a Polish writer Anna Morawska, points out four key factors helping crystallize the Nazi ideology. First of them is an old "nationalistic equation: German = Lutheran". Second is considering the mass-Church as a superior value that has given a reason to put a large number of elements of the Nazi ideology inside the structures of the Lutheran Church. Third is a Luther's doctrine of two Kingdoms – the earthly and the heavenly, both of which constitute God's ruling of the whole world. This has become a cause of misunderstanding by the church itself its duty towards society and state. The fourth factor on the list is the "cult" of order (*Ordnung*) as such<sup>1</sup>. The two kingdoms dichotomy has a strictly theological nature among these factors and is deeply ingrained in Lutheran social science.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms isn't unique to Lutheran theology. It seems to be a trace of dualistic thinking spread in Hellenic civilisation and was adopted by the Protestant Reformation through Augustine's doctrine of two Cities. Augustine introduced two terms into theology: *civitas terrena* and *civitas Dei*<sup>2</sup>. *Civitas terrena* was formed by a man's ego while *civitas Dei* arose out of God's love.

Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon assimilated this doctrine, relating it particularly to specific events like the peasant uprising of 1525 and radical revolutionary movements<sup>3</sup>. Article XVI of "The Augsburg Confession" entitled "Of Civil Affairs" states:

Of Civil Affairs they teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God, and that it is right for Christians to bear civil office, to sit as judges, to judge matters by the Imperial and other existing laws, to award just punishments, to engage in just wars, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to make oath when required by the magistrates, to marry a wife, to be give in marriage. (...)

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<sup>1</sup> A. Morawska. *Chrześcijanin w Trzeciej Rzeszy*. Warszawa 1970 p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*. Transl. by R.W. Dyson. New York: Cambridge University Press 1998.

<sup>3</sup> J. Todd. *Reformacja*. Warszawa: PAX 1971 p. 190 f.

They condemn also those who do not place evangelical perfection in the fear of God and in the faith, but in forsaking civil offices, for the Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart. Meanwhile, it does not destroy the State or the family, but very much requires that they be preserved as ordinances of God, and that charity be practiced in such ordinances. Therefore, Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws save only when commanded to sin, for then they ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5,29)<sup>4</sup>.

In this short article of the Augsburg Confession, one can sense clearly the historical context of its origin. The first part was directed against radical reformation movements, particularly their ideas of complete renouncing of earthly matters. The second one dealt with monastic life. The Protestant Reformation rejected every alienation from worldly life what seems to have been influenced by theological doctrine of office and vocation. Working for society and a state became a very important moral imperative for the Lutheran church.

The most distinct interpretation of political relationships in the Protestant Reformation was Luther's thesis *Vom weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei* which marked a borderline between an individual autonomy and their duty towards society and authorities. This, according to Luther is called conscience. No earthly government has the power over people's souls and no worldly superior authority has access to intimate sphere of human existence either. Such a clear border between private and public spheres was something new in the 16th century.

Luther's thesis brings many opposites and dichotomies out. The most important of them is a division of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of man. The first one is a domain of Christians – the people who stand in the face of salvation. The second belongs to the Kingdom of Satan<sup>5</sup>. The first one was given by the Gospel and the second by law. The Reformation theology distinguishes also very clearly between people who believe in Christ and those who don't. It seems to be a consequence of a doctrine of justification by faith alone, it also means the decisive importance of faith in man's salvation.

The dichotomy that best portrays Lutheran theory about the relationship between lay and religious power is the doctrine of spiritual (*geistliches*

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<sup>4</sup> *The Augsburg Confession*. Ed by R. D. McCormack. Fort Worth 2006 s. 20.

<sup>5</sup> E. Röhm, J. Thierfelder. *Kirche-Staat-Politik. Zum Öffentlichkeitsauftrag der Kirche*. Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag 1979 p. 12.

*Regiment Gottes)* and secular (*weltliches Regiment Gottes*) regiments of God. Through the first one God rules by love and Word. But because of evil existing in the world, there is also a need for the second one, which keeps watch over law and order, and regulates social structures and relationships. The spiritual regiment manifests itself in the person of a priest and the secular one in the person of a ruler. Both are complementary and constitute God's instrument for ruling the world. According to Luther, any opposition or separation of both secular and spiritual regiments is not possible<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. BONHOEFFER'S INTERPRETATION THE TWO KINGDOM'S DOCTRINE.

Bonhoeffer confirms a complementarity of both regiments within God's working in his lecture *Thy Kingdom come. The prayer of the Church for God's community on earth (Dein Reich komme! Das Gebet der Gemeinde um Gottes Reich auf Erden)*<sup>7</sup>.

Where is God, there is his Kingdom. God comes always through his Kingdom. And his Kingdom must go the same way God does. It comes with Him on earth, it is never present between us in other way like in double shape: as the whole Kingdom of world, Kingdom of Resurrection, breaking, denying, overcoming, destroying all kingdoms established by mankind and succumbed to curse of death, at the same time as the world accepting Kingdom of order, with his laws, communities and history. Both, the miracle and the order are the forms reflected Kingdom of God on earth. The miracle as a breaking of all orders and order as a maintaining of the miracle. However, the whole miracle covers in the world of order and an order keeps attitude of limitation regarding the miracle. Form of reflecting Kingdom of God as a miracle is called a church and form of reflecting Kingdom of God as an order we calls a state<sup>8</sup>.

Using such a dichotomy, the theologian refers to Luther's key concept and emphasizes inseparability of both forms of realizing the Kingdom of God on earth. The church couldn't exist without the state and the state without the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 14

<sup>7</sup> D. Bonhoeffer. *Bonhoeffer Auswahl. Anfänge. 1927-1933*. Bd. 1. München-Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag 1970 p. 151-163.

<sup>8</sup> It is a lecture given in Potsdam, 19 of November 1932. Ibid. p. 151-163.

church either. Both, they are manifestation of the same God's reality. This complementarity indicates that both, the church and the state, moderate each other, as well. They have their particular functions specific to them only, which excludes an opportunity to mingle the competences.

Bonhoeffer clearly introduces functional perspective of both notions in the doctrine of the mutual relation between the church and the state. The first reason is the complementarity of Luther's doctrine about two Regiments, which expresses itself through interpreting both the church and the state as the instruments of realisation God's Kingdom on earth. The second is credibility of being of the church and being of the state which means fulfilling their functions as well. When the church and the state don't realise God's Kingdom on earth, they deny their being *ex opere operato*.

According to Bonhoeffer, this functional complementarity of the church and the state is expressed in two aims of working, however they are achieved in different ways: 1) through testimony of life, 2) through testimony of community, 3) and through fight for liberating from the power of desire.

1) The church realises God's Kingdom by bearing testimony about God's miracle. It holds its office if it preaches credibility of Christ's Resurrection and the end of law of death (*Todesgesetz*) to which the world was succumbed. The function of the state must be realised by recognizing and protecting an order of life; it must reach as far as human's life faces danger, regarding all social groups in general as well as individuals. "An office of the state isn't a creation of the new life but retaining of the life which was done"<sup>9</sup>. Hence both the church and the state have the same function: testimony of the life through preaching it and saving it.

2) The church realises God's Kingdom if it overcomes solitude of man through the miracle of forgiveness and penance. The theologian writes here about ethical solitude overcome by establishing community of Resurrection (*communio sanctorum*) whose members are obligated to carry each other's guilt. Hence the church is a real community, however different from others, to which Bonhoeffer gives an attribute of "illusoriness". Love is the essence of relations within the community of the church and love embracing all its members is sine qua non of its existence. The state holds office if it watches human communities formed by God's order like marriage, family, nation. Mankind cannot be driven by the will of an individual, but by the will of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 158

communities. The state's duty is to watch over these rules. It overcomes human solitude by "maintaining the community's order"<sup>10</sup>.

3) The church realises God's Kingdom if its testimony leads to liberating from power of "desire", so to overcoming the egotism of an individual person. "Human desire led to itself only becomes judged, thwarted, destroyed in Christ's Cross and Resurrection. Our desire is turned to crucified body now. At the same time it changes in the world of Resurrection in desire of neighbor, God, brother, love, joy and salvation"<sup>11</sup>. The state is the form of God's Kingdom if it moderates responsibly the will of its citizens and protects them from the will of others.

Bonhoeffer insists firmly on confirming the priority of the church over the state. In his lecture given in April 1933 and entitled *The church regarding to Jewish question (Kirche vor den Judenfrage)*<sup>12</sup> he writes: "Undoubtedly, the church of the Reformation doesn't want to meddle in political working of the state. It doesn't intend to criticise or to praise the state's law. It rather ought to support the state as a God's order in godless world...The state's working is free from the church's interference. The history is made by the state, not the church"<sup>13</sup>. The state has a right to use violence if necessary, that is if God's order is in danger. This thesis confirms clearly a line of thought dominated in German society. Yet, Bonhoeffer warns afterwards: "However the church only, which gives testimony about God's enter into human history, knows what history means and, in consequence, what the state is"<sup>14</sup>. The church understood as a result of God's entering into the real world is a continuation of history's breaking, so it is superior to history. In consequence, interpretation of the state, its functions and competences belongs to the church.

Apart from this theological and "metahistorical" argument, Bonhoeffer states the fact that proper functioning of the state requires people or institutions which play a pedagogic and prosecutor's role in it. The state has a duty to consider and to accept the voice indicating a correct ethical interpretation of different phenomena. This voice is derived from Christian interpretation of politics. In consequence, the church understood sociologically as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 159

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 160

<sup>12</sup> D. Bonhoeffer. *Bonhoeffer Auswahl. Gegenwart und Zukunft der Kirche. 1933-1936.* Bd. 2. München-Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag 1970 p. 22-30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 23

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 24

an institution, has the right and duty to show correct moral values of its working to state's institution and to prosecute it if the state doesn't apply these values to social life<sup>15</sup>.

The state realises the function of maintaining God's order through making and enforcing laws above all. The church has a duty of permanent overseeing if the state doesn't deny its function so it takes action against infringement and "turning of an order". In this case the state loses its nature because of denying the constituting aim – the maintaining God's order.

Bonhoeffer details two examples in case of which the church has a duty to interfere in the state's working: "deficit of order and law" and "excess of order and law". The first of them is present when the state excludes a social group from being a part of global society or refuses it any part of laws. The second case includes building machinery of the state so big that it hinders or makes impossible working of the church or Christianity in general. Bonhoeffer calls such a situation a grotesque, because of denying by the state its own existing and laws given to it by Christianity. "The state threatening Christian preaching is threatening itself"<sup>16</sup>.

In the case of the state's improper working, when it doesn't hold its office, the church's interference can take action in three different ways: (1) directing a question to the state about Christian nature of its working which means publicly expressed doubt about its responsibility (*Verantwortungsmachung des Staates*), (2) serving the victims of the state's working, (3) expressing solidarity with the victims being "under bicycle" and putting a stick into a bicycle spoke<sup>17</sup> which means clear disturbing the state's working.

The first two possibilities are taken into consideration when the state's working doesn't expose God's order to danger, but the state is in crisis during changing social structures, for example. The third solution is possible only if the church recognises the state's working as "deficit" or "excess" of order and laws, so if it evaluates danger of the state's existing, in consequence. In this case the church can acknowledge no right to the state's existing in such a shape if it justifies the political action of the church against the state<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 23

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 25

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 26

<sup>18</sup> R. W in d. *Dem Rad in die Speichen fallen*. Weinheim 1999 p. 12.

### 3. BONHOEFFER'S CRITICISM OF RELATION BETWEEN THE NAZI STATE AND THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Bonhoeffer's political ecclesiology was formed with regard to specific deeds introduced by the state which shaped the structures and the actions of Nazi state. (1) The first of them was the rule of *Führerprinzip*, i.e. "rule of the leader" which means an organisation of all dimensions of political, cultural and religious life of global society around one person, i.e. around Hitler. (2) The second was passed by the "Aryan bills" (*Arierparagraphen*) which proceeded *Holocaust*.

1) Bonhoeffer belonged to one of the most famous opposition's representatives due to his criticism of the policy of National Socialistic Party. In his lecture *The leader and the individual in young generation (Der Führer und der Einzelne in der jungen Generation)* broadcast by Berlin's station on 1 February 1933, he took a stand against the role of the authority in the state ruling. In his lecture, he wanted to refute the arguments of German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*)<sup>19</sup> evoking the traditional Lutheran social science about the role of an office and distribution of competences between secular and church power.

According to Bonhoeffer one of the keys to proper policy of the church and society is a correct interpretation of authority and its genesis above all. In his understanding of Luther's social science the manifestation of God's order is embedded in an office. Bonhoeffer opposes this view to the authority of a leader, which arises from the personal traits of an individual beholding power.

There is a key question: authority of a leader or authority of an office? We face here the most urgent question of our times. The leader beholds power from the bottom, from the people he leads, and the office beholds the authority from the top, from heaven. The authority of the leader is connected with his person, whereas the authority of the office is impersonal. The authority from the bottom means justification of people themselves, and the authority of the office means the recognition of marked limits. The authority of the leader is borrowed, and the authority of the office is primal<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> *Deutsche Christen* was the movement within German Lutheran Church supporting policy of Hitler, established in 1928.

<sup>20</sup> *Bonhoeffer Auswahl* Bd. 2 p. 9.

The way of the distinguishing chosen by Bonhoeffer appeals to two completely different levels. The first- the authority of the leader is constituted by the set of subjective factors. It consists of one's personal belief that he is predestined to rule and instil this belief in people's consciousness. The second- the authority of order is determined by an objective factor, that is God's law. The first of them is transient, the second is long-lasting and unchanging. "There is enormous difference between the authority of a father, judge or teacher from one side and a leader from the other. The former have the authority by means of holding an office only. The leader has the authority on account of his personality. Their authority can be injured *undermined* but it will still exist. The authority of the leader is in danger in every moment, because it is in people's hands. I can choose a leader, but I cannot choose a father or a teacher. I bend the authority of leader but I submit to authority of a father and a teacher. The father, the judge, the teacher aren't leaders but they hold their office in fact<sup>21</sup>.

This distinction between subjective and objective factors, determining the genesis of authority bears consequences for an individual person. The authority of the leader forces him/her to accept the limitation of their freedom and their rights. The authority of the office moderates freedom of the individual person regarding neighbours. In other words, the authority of the leader stands apart from law, whereas the authority of the office stands within the law<sup>22</sup>.

What kind of law it that? Bonhoeffer realises that objectivity of the factors can be achieved through one assumption only, i.e. through placing its genesis in God. This is a source of the most important Bonhoeffer's distinguishment: the authority of the leader is determined by the authority of a man, and the source of the authority of the office is God Himself. This is why "the rule of the leader" (*Führerprinzip*) is enormous danger for society and becomes radical interference in church's preaching. It affects theological grounds directly, and above all the rules of *Solus Christus* (Christ only).

In our church we have one altar only and it is the altar of one almighty Lord, to Whom we owe adoration. He is the creator, before Whom all creation have to fall down on knees. The mightiest creatures compared to Him mean nothing more than dust. We haven't got a side alter to worship a man. It worships the only God on

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> H. Müller. *Von der Kirche zur Welt. Ein Beitrag zur Beziehung des Wortes Gottes auf die societas in Dietrichs Bonhoeffers theologischer Entwicklung*. Leipzig: Kohler und Amelang 1961 p. 173f.

the alter, not a man. He, who wants something else, is far away, he cannot be with us in God's house. He, who wants an alter for himself or who wants to build it for another man, sneers at God and God doesn't allow to sneer at Him. To be in the church means to have the courage to treat God as the only Lord. To be in the church means serving God and not a man, too. And it is necessary to have courage to do it. Our cowardice becomes the deepest obstacle to faith. We, in our church, preach believing in God and no other fair or other will either<sup>23</sup>.

The findings made by Bonhoeffer were a kind of prediction for the future. Hitler's deification was progressed rapidly with a passage of time. Bonhoeffer predicted accurately the results of introducing the structure "the rule of the leader" into the legislation, because of his diagnosing it as the destruction of the essence of church's preaching in particular.

2) According to Bonhoeffer, while "the rule of the leader" enters into the essence of theology, "Aryan bills" (*Arierparagraphen*) introduced into the church destroy its credibility.

German Christians prepared three forms of "Aryan bills": 1) In the most radical part they decided to exclude non-Aryan people from the German churches, who were required to establish the number of Judaic-Christian parishes. 2) It was predicted in the second form that legal regulations concerning state offices should have been applied to the church. For that reason priests of Jewish origins should have been dismissed and faculties of theology at universities weren't allowed to accept the applications from Jewish candidates either. 3) The "Aryan bills" aren't in effect in the German churches' ecclesiastical law but their remaining in silent means accepting these disgraceful regulations, in fact.

In his lecture *Kirche vor den Judenfragen*, Bonhoeffer enumerates three forms of state's working that disturb God's order reflected in the division of the competences of spiritual and secular powers. According to him, the "Aryan bills" introduced into the church, denies its preaching and destroys its essence. Either Nazi German state denies its vocation and its essence in consequence by forcing the church to exclude from its community some groups on account of its race. The church has a right and a duty to declare disobedience to the state in such a form and it is obligated to the actions to reform it.

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<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer Auswahl 2, s. 15

Bonhoeffer's discourse gives the testimony about deeply ingrained attitudes of antisemitism in German global society<sup>24</sup>. As the basis formed for his protest against "the Aryan bills" he makes distinction between Judaism in racial and religious meaning. The first one cannot be grounds or a component for any attitudes, in other words, the church must be absolutely indifferent to the racial status.

Judaism remains a religious notion. In such a sense it means a group or a nation living under God's law, according to the Old Covenant. If someone is Judaic or Christian, it is not a case of race but Christ's vocation and a man's response to it. Bonhoeffer refers to the first schism of the church which was a feud over circumcision of the baptised. According to him, this feud came back with the excluding from the Lutheran church in Germany people who were baptised but their nationality was Jewish. The first feud was qualified as heresy as well as "the Aryan bills".

The political theology of Bonhoeffer is a kind of testimony about how deeply Nazi ideology gets into thinking of German global society. At the same time, analysis of this theology put a question as to how strongly "German-Lutheran" identity influenced the Nazi ideology entering German society. In other words: how did the social science of Protestant Reformation enable Hitler's political victory? It is also the testimony of a difficult position of German Christians fighting for the credibility of their church and against overturning all moral values.

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<sup>24</sup> R. Schudter, R. Hirsch. *Der gelbe Fleck. Wurzeln und Wirkungen des Judenhasses in der deutschen Geschichte*. Berlin 1997.

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**NAZIZM I REFORMACJA PROTESTANCKA  
– TEOLOGIA POLITYCZNA DIETRICHА BONHOEFFERA**

**S t r e s z c z e n i e**

Polityczna teologia Dietricha Bonhoeffera, jednego z najbardziej popularnych i wpływowych teologów XX wieku, stanowi doktrynalną bazę jego walki przeciwko niemieckiemu państwu narodowo-socjalistycznemu. Bonhoeffer należał do ważniejszych postaci Kościoła Wyznającego (*Bekennende Kirche*), struktury, która funkcjonowała jako wewnętrzne opozycja wobec oficjalnej postawy Kościoła luterańskiego w Niemczech, sprzyjającej raczej Hitlerowi.

Główne rysy teologii politycznej powstały w latach 1933-1936, a więc w okresie zdobywania władzy przez narodowych socjalistów. Bonhoeffer poddaje krytyce tradycyjne rozumienie Reformacyjnej doktryny relacji między państwem i Kościółem, przekazującej temu pierwszemu ogólną kompetencję związanych z porządkiem ziemskim. Wskazuje na luterskie zastrzeżenie o granicy ludzkiego sumienia, której państwo nie może przekroczyć. Wprowadzone już w początkach rządów Hitlera „paragrafy aryjskie” oraz „zasada wodza”, a więc konkretne akty legislacyjne, radykalnie zaprzeczają chrześcijańskiemu Objawieniu. Zmuszają Kościół luterański jako instytucję, po raz pierwszy właściwie w historii, do wyjścia z układu podziału kompetencji, jaką tworzyła doktryna o dwóch Regimentach i do przeciwstawienia się władz sweckiej.

Polityczna teologia Bonhoeffera jest teoretycznym odbiciem myślenia społeczeństwa niemieckiego w latach trzydziestych. Jest również świadectwem teologa, który później rozwinię program radykalnej chrystologii we współczesnym świecie, a swoją postawę przypłaci życiem.

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**Key words:** Lutheran theology, church, state, political theology, Reformation, God's Kingdom.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teologia luterańska, Kościół, państwo, teologia polityczna, Reformacja, Królestwo Boże.