PROCLAMATION, PACIFISM, AND RESISTANCE[1]

Proclamação, Pacificismo e Resistência

Barry Harvey[2]

Resumo: Para que exista um projeto claro e convincente de transformação social e política, as pessoas precisam ser a favor de algo, e não apenas contra aquilo que desaprovam, além de terem a capacidade de imaginar alternativas viáveis. É necessário imaginar um futuro que torne a resistência válida, mas essa capacidade está faltando porque nós, humanos, esquecemos quem somos. Dietrich Bonhoeffer afirma que a principal tarefa da teologia é compreender o mundo melhor do que ele se entende, a partir do evangelho e de Cristo. No coração do evangelho está o Sermão da Montanha, que ele resume como "a proclamação do amor encarnado de Deus", que "chama as pessoas a amarem umas às outras e, assim, a rejeitarem tudo o que impede o cumprimento dessa tarefa", sendo o maior obstáculo a incapacidade de amar os inimigos e renunciar à violência. Juntas, a proclamação e o pacifismo fornecem a base para uma teologia política para a igreja: a recapitulação de toda a criação na vida, morte e ressurreição de Cristo. Bonhoeffer enfatiza o papel da imaginação para sustentar uma resistência significativa ao mal, e ele associa a atual falta de imaginação da igreja à perda da memória moral. As características que os seres humanos precisam para florescer — justiça, verdade e beleza, em particular — exigem tempo e firmeza, que só são cultivados dentro de uma memória moral viva.

Palavras-chave: Transformação social. Proclamação. Pacifismo Memória

Abstract: For there to be a clear and convincing project of social and political transformation, people need to be for something, not simply against what they deplore, but the ability to imagine viable alternatives. It is necessary to imagine a future that makes resistance worthwhile, but that ability is lacking because we humans have forgotten who we are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer contends that the primary task for theology is to understand the world better than it understands itself, from the gospel and from Christ. At the heart of the gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, which he summarizes as "the proclamation of the incarnate love of God" that "calls people to love one another, and thus to reject everything that hinders fulfilling this task," foremost among which is

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the failure to love one's enemies and renounce violence. Together proclamation and pacificism provide the basis for a political theology for the church: the recapitulation of all creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Bonhoeffer emphasizes the role of imagination to sustain meaningful resistance to evil, and he connects links the church's current lack of imagination to the loss of moral memory. The traits that humans need to flourish—justice, truth, and beauty in particular—require the time and steadfastness that are only cultivated within a living moral memory.

Keywords: Social transformation. Proclamation. Pacifism. Memory.

Introduction

There is a "ubiquitous but unavowed despair of many who long for something different," writes Eugene McCarraher, that "is camouflaged rhetorically by calls for 'subversion,' 'transgression,' or 'resistance'—none of which amount to a clear and convincing project of social and political transformation." People need to be *for* something, "not simply (and rightly) against something horrible; but it is the very capacity to imagine alternatives that neoliberalism seems to have effectively paralyzed" (MCCARRAHER, 2020). As a result, it has become easier to imagine the end of earth and nature than the end of late capitalism (JAMESON, 1994, p. 12).

Lacking is "the imagination of a future in terms of which resistance makes sense. As in *eros*, so in politics: you are what you desire. Right now our desires are not strong enough, not large enough, not bold and generous enough … because we seem to have forgotten who we are" (MCCARRAHER, 2022). Jonathan Tran observes that leaders of the Left in the United States acknowledge that they lack "a moral vision broad enough to make revolution more than resistance," which would involve the "proclamation of something that comes on the far side of revolutionary struggle, or better yet, witness to something original, something in the natural order of things, and so revolution as recapitulation" (TRAN, 2022, p. 16, 295).

Something more than objecting to the status quo is needed: a politics with a clear sense of who we are and what we should aspire after.

For those interested in the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, McCarraher's claim that resisting the powers that be cannot by itself inform and animate a meaningful project of social and political transformation offers a new and promising perspective on his work. It suggests an alternative to the notion of resistance that has often been used as the framework for interpreting

his thought for contemporary society, such as Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* and Sabine Dramm, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (RASMUSSEN, 1972; DRAMM, 2009). Resistance by itself does not by itself do justice to whole of Bonhoeffer's work, especially his emphasis on the form of Jesus Christ taking form in church-communities. He rejects the notion that the church should strive to be a "powerful organization" able to influence the powers and principalities (BONHOEFFER, 2010, p. 389-390), which I take to refer to the urge on the part of many political theologians to counsel modern nation-states as though they were still Christian kingdoms. As Bonhoeffer puts it in one of his last letters from prison, the primary task for theology in this regard is to understand the world better than it understands itself, from the gospel and from Christ (BONHOEFFER, 2010. p. 431; cf. BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 264). At the heart of the gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, which he summarizes as "the proclamation of the incarnate love of God" that "calls people to love one another, and thus to reject everything that hinders fulfilling this task," foremost among which is the failure to love one's enemies and renounce violence (BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 242). Together proclamation and pacificism provide the basis for a political theology for the church: the recapitulation of all creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

There are of course times that resistance is called for, but there can be no intelligible resistance to the exploitation of the earth and oppression of marginalized peoples unless those who engage in it have a place to stand. And though there is something praiseworthy in the longing on the part of those interested in political theology to move beyond resistance, to realize the gathering together of all humankind in peace, with each person and every nation justly related to all others and to God. Many who are motivated by this longing look to influence "public policy," but what too often goes unnoticed is that public policy, like the law, partakes of lethal power of the state (BUDDE, 2022, p. 4). And it is human, perhaps all-too-human, to become impatient at some point with the refusal on that part of the status quo to change, and resort to more violent strategies while making peace with the "collateral damage," which is surely a defining euphemism of our time.

McCarraher links the paucity of imagination capable of envisioning a future worthy of resisting the present constellation of institutions and practices to neoliberal capitalism, a term with which Bonhoeffer is unfamiliar, but he is not unaware of its effects on life in what he ironically

calls a world come of age. A short excursion into the politics of neoliberal capitalism and culture is therefore required.

Neoliberalism and the Hostile Takeover of Imagination

"Neoliberalism" is a contested term, with a number of definitions, most put forward in an attempt to specify its primary traits, a few to dismiss it as "the left's favorite insult" (CHAIT, 2017). That kind of ad hominem notwithstanding, neoliberalism credibly describes the configuration of state and market around the belief that "optimal outcomes will be achieved if the demand and supply for goods and services are allowed to adjust to each other through the price mechanism, without interference by government or other forces—through subject to the pricing and marketing strategies of oligopolistic corporations." (CROUCH, 2011, p. 17) Ryan LaMothe offers a more expansive description:

(1) human well-being, understood almost exclusively in economic terms, is best achieved by providing entrepreneurial freedoms so that individual actors (including corporations) can act out of their "rational" self-interests; (2) social goods will be maximized by expanding the reach and frequency of market transactions; (3) anything and anyone can be commodified; (4) the state is not to intervene to control markets or restrict the reach of commodification; (5) the state functions to ensure private property rights and deregulation so there can be free markets and free trade; (6) where markets do not exist, entrepreneurs and the state work together to privatize and deregulate (to privatize public education, prisons, health care, and the like); (7) corporations are to inform the state as to the laws that will enhance profit and market expansion; (8) greed benefits society; (9) "market freedoms are natural and political restraints on markets are artificial"; (10) individual citizens are to be entrepreneurs in a competitive state—*homines oeconomici* (LAMOTHE, 2017, p. 169–70).

McCarraher similarly describes neoliberalism as "an attempt to remake human life in the image and likeness of the market. It is a moral and metaphysical imagination in which capitalist property relations provide the template for understanding the world." For those immersed in this social imaginary, there is no alternative: "it is capitalism all the way down." The market is therefore not merely the way goods are allocated, but has been installed as the ontological architecture of the cosmos, becoming "the latest modern surrogate for traditional divinity" (MCCARRAHER, 2022).

Operating in concert with nationalist and racist movements as well as capitalism, this culture establishes a model and mold for the "entrepreneurial recasting of personality," mandating "a conception of that self as an evolving resume, a node of risk calculation, a reservoir of vendible talents; a willingness, and even an enthusiasm, to remain protean, mobile, plastic, and 'flexible' to accommodate the conditions of the Market" (MCCARRAHER, 2014, p. 151–52). To those who have bent the knee at this idolatrous altar, this is just how things are, and people must adjust their lives accordingly.

As McCarraher indicates, the making and remaking of human life begins with the imagination, which at the most basic level is the ability of the human mind to fashion mental images of things (persons, events, objects, ideas) that are not actually present to our five senses. Building upon this first power, imagination also allows us to use these images as signs of realities not immediately evident or not apprehended. At this more complex level, imagination forms an integrative power of mind through which we take in the people, places, things and events around us as *world*, that is, as intelligible and coherent, possessing "the inner consistency of reality" (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 47). This higher power of mind to conjecture, hypothesize, and invent thus constructs our sense "of self and the common good that emerge from the way we understand the nature of the cosmos—what philosophers and theologians would call our metaphysics, ontology, or cosmology" (MCCARRAHER, 2019, p. 5).

The present task for political theology is to assist the church in retrieving and renewing its own imaginative tradition and political ethos about what it means to be human. Without this tradition the church lacks the theological resources to sustain itself in its work of speaking truthfully in and to our present circumstances. Resistance, when understood as a mode of witness to the truth, requires the prior cultivation of "sites of counter-formation, alternative spaces and times in the midst of those immersed in neoliberalism, which are ordered around different narratives than those that structure our consumerism." For Bonhoeffer, the site that fosters the imagination that informs meaningful resistance is the church.

Amnesia in the Megacities of Today

Like McCarraher, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the role of imagination to sustain a meaningful social project, and he also links the church's lack of imagination in the modern world to the loss of

moral memory, rendering Christians unable to recognize that we are heirs to a past that we must faithfully make new to make our way in the present, and then pass that tradition along to future generations. In a passage that aptly anticipates the void of a neoliberal culture in which everything is commodified and disposable, he writes, "Nothing (*das Nichts*) holds fast; nothing stays in place. Everything is short term and short winded." The traits that humans need to flourish—justice, truth, and beauty in particular—require the time and steadfastness that are only cultivated within a living moral memory. When people lack a sense of a past for which they are accountable, and a future for which to plan, there is no way "to take of hold of such persons, challenge them, and bring them to their senses." Anything we might say, even if it makes a momentary impression, is soon swallowed up by our moral amnesia (BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 128; 2010, p. 284).

At the core of this self-inflicted forgetfulness on the part of Christian communities, adds Kelly Johnson, is a cultural context that is immersed in global consumer networks of late capitalism. These networks separate religious imagery "from the bounds of tradition or the authority of saints and teachers, making faith a matter of personal preference, with little intrinsic relation to social reality." Christians do not need to construct a radically new understanding of God in response, as some have suggested; the problem is that they "do not know the God of their own traditions." Blame for this pervasive ignorance cannot be attributed solely to inadequate religious education classes and curricula but has much more to do with churches across the theological spectrum surrendering the work of shaping and directing the desires of hearts and the contours of minds to the whims of nation-states and markets, leaving believers incapable of "sustained and self-critical engagement on any topic" (JOHNSON, 2014, p. 167–68).

Forgetfulness of what it means to be just, truthful, and mindful of beauty opens the door to "thingifying" (KING, 1991, p. 251) God's handiwork of creation, imaging human beings and nature alike as means to an end, interchangeable cogs to be exploited, rather than as that with whom we live, move, and have our being as a gift from the Creator. The effect of our self-inflicted amnesia is certainly felt by billions in the globe's ever-expanding urban centers and radiating out from there to the people and land in rural areas. Knowledge workers, whom McCarraher calls the

cognitariat,[3] are compelled to constantly remake themselves to accommodate the changing demands of the market, while the remainder of the labor force scrambles to scratch out a subsistence existence in a political economy that exploits and disposes of them. Forgetfulness deprives Christians of imagining possibilities that are open to the coming into the world of the incarnate one, in whom God has united the divine and creaturely realities.

The poverty, traffic jams, noise, smog, destruction, chaos, and class divisions that so many now endure in these megacities are symptomatic of the precariousness of twenty-first century urban realities. Though it may seem counterintuitive, this uncertainty does not represent the failure of the modern world, argues Michael Budde, but "a predicted and predictable aspect of its successes. The dominance of megacities…is a product of the development policies and 'improvements' that have animated states, NGO's (sic), corporations, and other actors since the 1940s" (BUDDE, 2022, p. 108). The policies that have brought about this state of affairs have all been predicated on violence, starting with primitive accumulation in the so-called "Old World" and colonial "improvement" in the "New World," to the development projects of the "Third World," and now to the neoliberal recasting of humanity. Sometimes it has been blatant, as soldiers, police, or mercenaries forced people of ancestral land, cut off access to sources of food, water and basic materials, suppressed workers' collectives and killed those who try to fight back against the seemingly indominable advance of industrialization, development, and globalization. At other times the violence takes more subtle forms, "from changes in tax structures designed to push people from self-provisioning activities … to those dependent on wage markets, to legal processes that replace traditional land tenure systems with those that benefit the favored agents and outcomes of development processes." The fact that matters are for the most part securely in the hands of the powerful and well-to-do does not mean that the violence has ended, for dominion on this scale requires it us as an ongoing practice. Powerful nations are preparing militarized responses to the dislocation and expulsion of those who even now are most affected by political upheaval and ecological collapse (BUDDE, 2022, p. 95).

[3] According to McCarraher, the cognitariat consists of "'immaterial' workers in service, technology, and cultural firms, as well as in the increasingly proletarianized professions of education, medicine, and law." MCCARRAHER, 2014, p. 144.

Re-Membering Christ in the Twenty-First Century world

Those who wish to engage these circumstances in conversation with Bonhoeffer need to attend to his account of how the world is, now, in the uniting of the realities of God and humanity in Christ, and how the church-community proclaims the joining of heaven and earth primarily through worship, and witness. The wellspring of the church's moral memory and imagination is the coming of the reign of Jesus Christ: "Action in accordance with Christ is in accord with reality because it allows the world to be world and reckons with the world as world, while at the same time never forgetting that the world is loved, judged, and reconciled in Jesus Christ by God" (BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 264).

For Bonhoeffer, the call of Christ is not first and foremost for Christians to advise the powerful or certify the world's brand of justice, but to allow ourselves to be drawn into the messianic event through sharing in God's suffering in worldly life. Participating in this event occurs through the formation of communities that strive to proclaim the present reality of God's reconciling justice (SCHLABACH, 1999, p. 450). In so doing Christians "re-member" Christ, in whom our future, and the future of all creation presently exists, and which, through the sacraments, particularly the eucharist, becomes a present reality. In the eucharistic celebration the presence of the future in Christ is mysteriously communicated to the world (MCCABE, 1968, p. 141). In this world that has been claimed by Christ, the church is being called once again, today, to testify to the good news that "God makes peace with humankind and that God's kingdom is drawing near" (BONHOEFFER, 2007. p. 390).

Given the dependence on coercion and violence on the part of nations and global markets, renouncing violence is basic to imagining an alternative, and though many have argued that Bonhoeffer renounces pacifism, there is good evidence that he does not (GREEN, 2005, p. 45). Bonhoeffer's understanding of pacifism, which is predicated on revelation and not on abstract principles, does not promote a detached passivity in the face of injustice. In a 1935 letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich in which he emphasizes taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously, he states that there are ethical matters, peace and social justice in particular, for which an uncompromising stand needs to be taken (BONHOEFFER, 2007, p. 285). In *Ethics* he states that Christians are tasked with preparing the way for the coming of Christ, which he calls "a commission of

immeasurable responsibility given to all who know about the coming of Jesus Christ. The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom." Failure to address those needs constitutes blasphemy against God and neighbor. Nevertheless, preparing the way for Christ cannot be reduced to or equated with creating programs of social reform or advocacy for public policy. All that Christians undertake with respect to the needs of the world "depends on this action being a spiritual reality, since what is finally at stake is not the reform of worldly conditions but the coming of Christ" (BONHOEFFER, 2005, p. 163–64).

Local Christian Political Economy

To see in concrete terms what Bonhoeffer is proposing we need exemplars of the kind of local politics practiced by Christians that do not depend on futile efforts to either slay or tame the three-headed monster of capitalism, classism, and racism. One such community is in the Bay Area of San Francisco, the home of Silicon Valley. The "north star of an enormously impactful tech industry and a paragon of internationally scaled cultural diversity," San Francisco comprises one of the more powerful metropoles, "linking together whole municipalities and empowering entire economies" across the globe (TRAN, 2022, p. 193). On the margins of this city, in the Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood, Redeemer Community Church, together with another congregation, helped to start and continues to support Dayspring Partners, a technology company. The mission of Dayspring is to offer an alternative to "'untrammeled, competitive capitalism' and the pressures capitalism puts on both 'relationships within the company when we see ourselves in a zero-sum struggle with our coworkers' and 'relationships with neighbors when corporations pursue the narrow financial interest of shareholders while disregarding the impacts that has on the communities in which we operate'." Together with a preparatory school also associated with the church, Dayspring has sought to develop in the midst of the predatory transnational ecology of the Bay Area a microecology, refusing to amass wealth as private property, but treating it as intertwined with their neighbors "without whom they could not exist and in which they find joy," and thereby break with the neoliberal sacrament which ensures that wealth will always grow disproportionately with respect to income (TRAN, 2022, p. 221, 227).

The politics practiced in the Bayview/Hunters Point neighborhood by Redeemer Community Church only makes sense in terms of a theology of the cross such as that preached by Bonhoeffer, particularly its intrinsic affinity to J. R. R. Tolkien's narration of history as the long defeat that nevertheless "contains…some samples or glimpses of final victory" (TOLKIEN, 2000, p. 255). Imagining history thusly does not exempt Christians from the struggle for peace and social justice, but it does perform that work under the sign of the cross, which as James Cone says, "inverts the world's value system, proclaiming that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last" (CONE, 2020, p. 139-140). It is this radical hope that can sustain a resistance that matters, as a sign of the recapitulation of all things.

A Final Note

I am fully aware of the church's deplorable track record, certainly in my home country of the United States. As Tran laments, the church "has not only been a site of racism, but in a significant sense the church in America *is* American racism—the church, America, and racism an inverted *vestigium trinitatas* (sic) of a broken world" (TRAN, 2022, p. 195). Sadder yet is the fact that there are few if any places on the globe where the three-headed Cerberus of capitalism, classism, and racism has not sunk its teeth into the body politic of Christ. It takes an audacious act of faith to affirm what I have written about the church in view of its track record. And yet, without the church, theology is little more than what Bonhoeffer calls the phraseological, that is, free-floating ideas that have little traction with the real revealed in Christ. I can only say that the Christian community is, has always been, and will remain until the final consummation a mixed community, on the one hand empowered by the Spirit to make present the presence and activity of the crucified and risen Christ in a hurting and waiting world, and on the other an impure and sinful community that needs the grace and forgiveness it proclaims.

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