

Bonhoeffer and the New Monasticism

BY

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For

Rosemary Elizabeth Brook

for believing

Declaration

I hereby declare that unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, the whole thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted elsewhere for a degree.

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Date

As the supervisor, I have agreed to the submission of this thesis.

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Table of Contents

	Page no.
1. Introduction	1
2. Bonhoeffer and monasticism	10
2.1. 'Theologian' 1906-1931	11
2.2. 'Christian' 1931-1940	16
2.3. 'Man for his times' 1940-1945	31
2.4. Conclusion	34
3. Life together	35
3.1. Foundations	35
3.2. Experiments	37
3.3. Finkenwalde	40
3.4. The 'House of Brothers'	49
3.5. Conclusion	57
4. The new monasticism	58
4.1. Protestant antecedents	58
4.2. Ecumenical 'proto' communities	60
4.3. The 'twelve marks'	67
4.4. Conclusion	80
5. Relevance of the new monasticism	81
5.1. In the West	81
5.2. In South Africa	85
5.3. Conclusion	90
6. Conclusion	92
7. Bibliography	97
7.1. Primary sources	97
7.2. Secondary sources	97
7.3. Internet sources	100

Chapter 1. Introduction

Abstract

This mini-dissertation represents a critical reading and interpretation of key Bonhoeffer texts, including *Sanctorum Communio*, *Discipleship* and *Life Together*. Analysis of these texts is integrated with an exploration of Bonhoeffer's personal development, as interpreted by his biographer, Eberhard Bethge. In particular, attention is given to the intentional community at Finkenwalde during the years 1935-1937 with a view to assessing Bonhoeffer's monastic convictions. It is these convictions which form the basis of the comparison between Finkenwalde and the contemporary movement known as New Monasticism.

*The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this.*¹

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The ripples generated by the life and work of Bonhoeffer have been seismic, radiating across time and space. Books and articles exploring his ethics, social theory and theology now number in the thousands, testifying to the evergreen quality of his thought. It is his life and death, however, that lends credence to what he wrote – so much so, that it seems reasonable to speak of the Bonhoeffer ‘phenomenon’². This paper attempts to focus on an aspect of that phenomenon that has hitherto received little attention: monasticism. More precisely, we will explore the connection between his monastic conception of the 1930s and a modern interpretation encountered in some parts of the world today, namely *neo monasticism* or the ‘new monasticism’.

Bonhoeffer's assertion, articulated in a letter to his agnostic brother in 1935, is claimed by many new monastics³ today as prescient regarding the need for fresh expressions of an ancient tradition. In her introduction to a recent book about a contemporary Baptist monastery in Australia, for example, Phyllis Tickle writes: ‘What Bonhoeffer, now famously, said in that letter was to prove both prophetic and affirming to that which it predicted ... within twenty-five years of his own martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis, a new monasticism was aborning all over western Christendom.’⁴

¹ Bethge, E. 2000. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: a biography*. (Revised and edited by Victoria Barnett.) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 462.

² de Gruchy, J.W. ‘Bonhoeffer, for us, today’ in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 127 (March 2007), 2.

³ The term preferred in new monastic literature to the term ‘monks’ or ‘nuns’.

⁴ Dekar, P.R. 2008. *Community of the transfiguration: the journey of a new monastic community*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, ix.

But is this appropriation of Bonhoeffer's statement a legitimate departure point for the movement? Was he calling for a new tradition, distinct from the church, or simply suggesting 'that the disciplines of the monastic life – prayer, meditation, fasting, communal life – need to be restored to Christians'⁵? The difference in meaning between these interpretations indicates the importance of acquiring an accurate understanding of what *Bonhoeffer* meant by a 'new kind of monasticism'.

Attention must be given, therefore, to a range of issues: what did he understand by church 'restoration'? Why did he consider monasticism as key to that restoration, and how would the new differ from the old?

Such questions must be answered chiefly at Finkenwalde⁶ with the intentional community⁷ that lived there, in terms of Bonhoeffer's understanding of monasticism and its value for the church. It is here where we might observe how his own beliefs were reflected both in that fellowship and, by extension, in the new monastic 'community of communities' of our day.

Our hypothesis is that although the contexts are quite different, a comparison of their communal characteristics reveal significant correlation. If we can succeed in drawing a line joining the two, we will have argued for the recognition of Bonhoeffer's training experiment at Finkenwalde (1935-1937) as a prototype community of the contemporary movement known as the New Monasticism, and located the beginning of a definite era – not only in monasticism, but in the history of Christianity.

The goals for this study are as follows: firstly, through his writings and activities we attempt to trace Bonhoeffer's convictions regarding monasticism; secondly, we observe how these convictions were implemented at Finkenwalde from 1935 to 1937; thirdly, we investigate the new monasticism and its relevance both in the West and for South Africa; finally, we compare the monastic features of seminary life with the characteristics of neo monasticism and draw a conclusion.

⁵ Rakoczy, S. 'The witness of community life: Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and the Taizé community' in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 127 (March 2007), 45f.

⁶ For the location of Finkenwalde, see chapter 3.3.

⁷ Due to its multitudinous form 'intentional community' is not simply defined, though a few common features are readily apparent: it a) is residential, b) is planned, c) has some kind of common vision – whether religious, ecological, etc. One popular definition reads: *An 'intentional community' is a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working cooperatively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared core values. The people may live together on a piece of rural land, in a suburban home, or in an urban neighborhood, and they may share a single residence or live in a cluster of dwellings.* http://wiki.ic.org/wiki/Intentional_Communities, link verified 21 November 2009.

As already indicated, we are focused on Bonhoeffer's *monastic* praxis; other aspects of the Bonhoeffer phenomenon fall outside the scope of this paper. Practically, this means that our time-frame includes the earlier years up to the closure of Finkenwalde and the writing of *Life Together* in 1937. An exception will be his idea of the *disciplina arcani* (discipline of the secret) conceived towards the end of his life.

However it may assist our purpose, a reduced field of view does the phenomenon a grave disservice – for Bonhoeffer seems to find fresh purchase and application with every succeeding generation. Much was made, for example, of his *Tegel* theology that appeared to suit the 'secular sixties', religionless Christianity and a 'world come of age'. To the surprise of many, however, religion did not disappear or even atrophy. 'Quite the contrary! We are discovering today the indisputable reality of 'religion after the Enlightenment' ... Apparently, Bonhoeffer's idea of the nonreligious human being and of the 'worldly world' was a misconception.'⁸ Harvey Cox, author of *The Secular City*, had to admit: 'Rather than an age of rampant secularization and religious decline, it appears to be more of an era of religious revival and a return to the sacral.'⁹

While this aspect of Bonhoeffer's theology belongs to the final phase of his life story (*cf.* chapter II C), it is precisely when one facet seems to fade in significance that another takes on substance. Certainly for South Africa, the motifs of justice and church struggle became decidedly important in the 1970s and 1980s¹⁰. We do not need to explore those parallels here.¹¹ It is rather beyond that dark age that we must cast ahead: what is the meaning of Bonhoeffer 'for a new day'¹²?

In his book *The next Christendom*¹³, Philip Jenkins has shown the substantial shift in devotional practice from the West to the global South. It is in the dual contexts of religious vitality in Africa and Asia, and of declining church influence in Europe and North America, that we must enquire concerning the relevance of *Bonhoeffer and the new monasticism* for South Africa. Could it be that an alternative monastic community has more to offer in a disillusioned West than in our keenly religious continent?

⁸ Bosch, D.J. 1991. *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in the theology of mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 476.

⁹ Cox, H. 1984. *Religion in the secular city*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 20. Quoted in Bosch, D.J. 1995. *Believing in the future: toward a missiology of western culture*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 42.

¹⁰ *Cf.* de Gruchy, J.W. 1984. *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: theology in dialogue*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans

¹¹ *Cf.* chapter 5.2.

¹² The topic of the 1996 IBS meeting at Cape Town; *cf.* de Gruchy's book of the same name.

¹³ Jenkins, P. 2002. *The next Christendom: the coming of global Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In line with this appraisal, John de Gruchy observed in 1973 that ‘there is a sense in which the Enlightenment as an historical event has passed us by at the southern tip of Africa, and therefore we are still a religious rather than a secular society.’¹⁴ Just two decades later, however, the picture had altered so much that de Gruchy could now write: ‘The church in South Africa has to learn, and learn quickly, how to be the ‘church for others’ in a post-Constantinian, multi-faith context where the privileges of dominance are fading’¹⁵.

It is, perhaps, in the field of ethics that Finkenwalde and its contemporary descendants can help the South African church. Early monasticism was, after all, a move away from moral decline. Now, in the midst of a seemingly uncritical alliance between church and state, a gap between rich and poor that continues to widen, unremitting crime statistics and a climate that is steadily warming, we may well heed the sober assessment of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre:

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been among us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.¹⁶

The importance of MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue* for our study lies in its recognition of that moment in Western society long ago when ‘men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*.’¹⁷ A key issue in this study is thus the church’s relationship with the *imperium* or state – or, as new monastics put it, ‘Empire’.

For new monastic communities, ‘relocation to the abandoned places of Empire’ is a basic tenet of their self-understanding. It may not be difficult to appreciate this notion in post-modern America, but it may mean something substantially different in post-colonial Africa or a rapidly secularising South Africa. What MacIntyre’s analysis of past moral discourse helps us to understand is that the development of virtue cannot be divorced from its communal context.

¹⁴ de Gruchy, J.W. 1975. ‘Bonhoeffer in South Africa’ in *Bonhoeffer: exile and martyr*. New York: Seabury Press, 41.

¹⁵ de Gruchy, J.W. 1997. ‘The reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa’ in *Bonhoeffer for a new day: theology in a time of transition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 364.

¹⁶ MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After virtue: a study in moral theory*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 245

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 244.

‘A mission to the West must be *counter-cultural*, though not in an escapist way...’ surmised David Bosch, shortly before his death. ‘I believe that we have to communicate an alternative culture to our contemporaries. Part of our mission will be to challenge the hedonism around us, inculcating something of the spirit of being ‘resident aliens’ in the world.’¹⁸

This quote refers to a title by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*¹⁹, in which churches are challenged to develop Christian life and community rather than trying to reform secular culture (*cf.* shoring up the *imperium*). Not surprisingly, Hauerwas features strongly among those authors favoured by new monastic communities. His ‘resident alien’ thesis finds an echo in the contention that the church is a *pilgrim* community – an idea, interestingly, that ‘first surfaced clearly in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.’²⁰ Indeed, Hauerwas’ thinking is ‘very similar to that of Bonhoeffer in that it links, at its heart, church, world and Christ. For Hauerwas, as for Bonhoeffer, there can be no Christian theology and no Christian ethics without the church.’²¹ We will engage with Hauerwas’ thought later, chiefly in chapter V.

By now it should be clear that the place of community, past and present, is an essential category of this study. Any attempt to probe what Bonhoeffer understood by ‘Christian community’ must give precedence to his doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio* (Communion of Saints), a seminal study of the sociology (or ‘sociality’) of the church. Before Adolf Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Bonhoeffer

laid down the foundation which was to be invulnerable to all Nazi co-opting of the church. That was the simple theological axiom: the church is ... Christ existing as community. This phrase was an adaptation of Hegel’s statement, ‘God existing as community’, with the alteration of only one word. But given the ease with which people project all manner of self-serving ideas into the word ‘God’, and the difficulty of doing it so easily with the name of Christ, the Christological concentration of Bonhoeffer’s axiom was liberating. Single-minded adherence to Christ was all it took to resist the whole worldly panoply of National Socialism.²²

It is this insight that helps us appreciate the resolve of both teacher and students in their desire to live out Christian community at Finkenwalde under severe constraints. Looking ahead, the idea of recognising the congregation as the real manifestation of Christ may also explain why the new

¹⁸ Bosch, *Believing in the future*, 56f.

¹⁹ Hauerwas, S. and Willimon, W.H. 1989. *Resident Aliens: life in the Christian colony*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

²⁰ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 373.

²¹ Richardson, N. 2007. ‘*Sanctorum Communio* in a time of reconstruction? Theological pointers for the church in South Africa’ in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 127 (March 2007), 109.

²² Green, C.J. 1999. ‘Human sociality and Christian community’ in *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 120.

monastic movement, while arguably anti-establishment, is not 'anti-church'. As Wilson-Hartgrove indicates,

The 'new' in new monasticism is closely tied to the 'new' of new creation. The new monasticism may be distinguished from the Christian communitarian movements of the [19]60's and [19]70's in that it is self-consciously committed to the church (not rejecting it) and tied to tradition (not 'new' in the sense of novel).²³

In 2006, when new monastic Shane Claiborne was asked in a newspaper interview: 'Aren't you copying what the newly converted hippies did in the 1970s when they formed Christian communes across the country?', he replied:

What's unique about our communities today is that we don't see ourselves as an underground church or detaching ourselves from the larger congregations. Actually, we're really integrated in our neighbourhood. Folks identify us as a monastic movement because they see us as a renewal connected to the larger body, not in schism from it ... Our embarrassment and frustration with the church is the very reason we engage, not disengage.²⁴

'New' monasticism, of course, can be described as any recent development within the monastic tradition; for example, the Cluniac reforms of the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is in its modern sense, however, that the term is used: that is, contemporary intentional communities drawing on classic monastic tradition. They are novel enough that little has been written about them – hardly surprising for a movement still in the early stages of being analysed. Few self-consciously 'new monastic' communities are more than twenty years old.

On the other hand, inasmuch as we are engaging a renewed *monasticism* (that is, a movement within Christianity) this enquiry cannot technically be described as contributing to the study of 'new' religious movements (NRMs) – monasticism is, of course, an ancient tradition. Or has new monasticism generated enough independent momentum to be regarded as such? According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, NRMs are 'new' because

they offer innovative religious responses to the conditions of the modern world, despite the fact that most NRMs represent themselves as rooted in ancient traditions. NRMs are also usually regarded as 'countercultural': that is, they are perceived (by others and by themselves) to be alternatives to the mainstream religions of Western society, especially Christianity in its normative forms.²⁵

²³ Wilson-Hartgrove, J. 2004. *Report on new monasticism gathering: the unveiling of a contemporary school for conversion*. Unpublished report in my possession dated 25 June 2004, 18.

²⁴ Duin, J. 2006. 'Modern 'monastery'' in *The Washington Times*. Interview with Shane Claiborne, published 14 December 2006. Internet article at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/dec/13/20061213-114735-8806r/>, link verified 13 November 2009.

²⁵ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1007307/New-Religious-Movement>, link verified 30 October 2009.

As we shall see, this definition accurately describes the new monasticism. A broad issue we explore, then, is the ‘grey area’ existing between an ancient tradition and a new movement drawing on that tradition. Scant though it may be, literature on neo monasticism continues to increase concordant with the expansion of the movement.

By contrast, much has been written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Secondary sources continue to proliferate. A 2005 bibliography²⁶ held at Columbia University runs into 178 pages, well over two thousand works. It was updated by Joel Lawrence extensively in 2007²⁷ and, most recently, in 2009²⁸. A review of the data reveals two obvious features: firstly, the regular burst of new titles following the meetings of various Bonhoeffer interest-groups; for example, the *International Bonhoeffer Society* (IBS) every four years, and the *American Academy of Religion* annually; secondly, the tendency of titles to cluster about theological trends: for example, the ‘death of God’ theme popularised by John Robinson in the late 1960s is reflected in the density of works in that decade engaging with Bonhoeffer’s prison theology.

Of the English sources mentioned in the updated bibliography, 147 correspond with the subject of our study. Of these titles, just eight refer directly to monasticism, while the term ‘new monasticism’ is not found anywhere. This lack bears out what was said regarding the novelty of the movement, necessitating the use of such electronic resources as online journals and the Internet for data-collection. The results of the literature survey are tabulated below in descending order:

<i>Key terms</i>	<i>Alternate terms</i>	<i>Quantity</i> ²⁹
‘discipleship’	‘Discipleship’ (the book)	47
‘spirituality’	‘imitation’, ‘spiritual formation’	45
‘community’	‘ <i>Sanctorum Communio</i> ’	37
‘monasticism’	‘monk’, ‘Benedict’, ‘Merton’	8
‘ <i>disciplina arcani</i> ’	‘secret discipline’	6
‘vocation’	‘calling’, ‘ministry’	6
‘Sermon on the Mount’	‘beatitudes’	4

²⁶ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/img/assets/5435/SecondarySourcesBib.pdf>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁷ <http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~diebon06/Bibliography2007.html>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁸ http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~diebon06/Annual_DBupdate2009%20final.pdf, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁹ Some titles are indicated in more than one category.

For the scholar, access to source material has been made considerably easier with the publication of Bonhoeffer's collected works in the German critical edition, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (DBW, 17 vols.) published by Christian Kaiser Verlag, and in the English translation, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (DBWE, 16 vols.) published by Fortress Press³⁰. Very helpful in this series are the expert introductions, German-authored afterwords and extensive bibliographies. Useful for our purposes are DBWE 1, 4, and 5; respectively: *Sanctorum Communio*, *Discipleship*, and *Life Together*.

The definitive biography is the 2000 edition by Bonhoeffer's close friend and interpreter, Eberhard Bethge, revised and edited by Victoria Barnett, based on the seventh German edition and published by Christian Kaiser Verlag. Much of the next chapter is based on this material. As Barnett cogently points out, like many scholars Bethge

approached and studied Bonhoeffer primarily as a theological figure ... The result is that in much of the literature about Bonhoeffer, the 'historical' and 'theological' Bonhoeffer have been conflated, and Bonhoeffer's actual role in German history ... has been 'theologised' – that is, shaped by religious understandings of him as a modern-day Christian martyr.³¹

On the issue of gender-inclusive language, we acknowledge the pre-WWII cultural milieu of which Bonhoeffer was part. Where possible, we have amended terms such as those referring to 'man', etc. A difficulty is encountered, however, regarding Bonhoeffer's use of the term *brethren* or *brothers*. Granted, 'according to today's linguistic conventions, the 'sisters' seem to be dismissed from Bonhoeffer's ecclesiastical solidarity.'³² Yet, despite him describing it akin to 'a house of deaconesses',³³ the 'House of Brethren' was a community of males. Bonhoeffer refers to his 'brothers' at (and after) Finkenwalde in a fraternal sense. To translate the phrase after a gender-neutral fashion, or as 'brothers and sisters', would be misleading and somewhat trite.

As Geoffrey Kelly points out in his Introduction to *Life Together* (DBWE 5), Bonhoeffer the man wrote for the *church*.

The experiment in community undertaken at Finkenwalde was a 'mission entrusted to the church,' 'a responsibility to be undertaken by the church as a whole,' something that necessitated both a willingness of the church to assist in the work' and the 'vigilant

³⁰ According to the latest edition (No. 97, Fall 2009) of the *IBS* newsletter, three DBWE volumes remain untranslated: 11, 14, and 15. Unfortunately for this paper, vol. 14 deals with Bonhoeffer's training of seminarians at Finkenwalde.

³¹ Barnett, V.J. 2009. 'The Bonhoeffer Works project and the future of Bonhoeffer scholarship' in *International Bonhoeffer Society newsletter*. No. 97, Fall 2009, p. 12.

³² Pangritz, A. 1997. 'Sharing the destiny of his people' in *Bonhoeffer for a new day: theology in a time of transition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 269.

³³ Bonhoeffer, D. 1966. *The way to freedom: letters, lectures and notes 1935-1939 from the collected works*. London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 31. Interestingly, there are still Protestant convent communities active in Berlin and Hamburg today.

cooperation of every responsible party.’ It is clear that, for the most part, Bonhoeffer intended his study to be a description of one possibility in the formation of Christian community.³⁴

Therefore, where ‘brother’ can be interpreted to mean another Christian, that term has been translated as such. The word ‘brethren’ is used only in direct quotes from primary sources, or in the name of the intentional community at Finkenwalde: the *Bruderhaus*, or ‘House of Brethren’.

This thesis is a non-empirical study consisting primarily of literature analysis. To trace Bonhoeffer’s convictions about monasticism, we attend not only to his own writings in DBWE 1, 4 and 5, but also to the related activities recorded in Bethge’s biography: for example, his spiritual exercises in student retreats, and his visit to Anglican communities in 1935. How these convictions were implemented at Finkenwalde is the focal point of this study. For the characteristics of the new monastic movement, we refer to the book edited by Rutba House, *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism* and published in 2005 by Cascade Books in Eugene, Oregon.

Finally, in the measured words of John de Gruchy, ‘I bring to my task the inevitable predispositions of a white, male, English-speaking South African. I hope that my critical awareness of who I am in some measure counterbalances whatever distortions are implicit in my understanding of the situation and my attempt to do theology within it.’³⁵

³⁴ Kelly, G.B. 1996. ‘Editor’s introduction to the English edition’ in *Life together; The prayerbook of the Bible: an introduction to the Psalms*. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 5) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 23.

³⁵ de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 6f.

Chapter 2. Bonhoeffer and monasticism

Before turning to the Bethge biography, it is helpful here to briefly outline the milestones of an all-too-brief career up to the time when Bethge encountered Bonhoeffer at Finkenwalde.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer studied at the universities of Tübingen and Berlin, where he completed his doctoral thesis *Sanctorum Communio* under Reinhold Seeberg in 1927. After further studies, he was appointed as a lecturer in systematic theology at the University of Berlin in 1931, as well as a youth secretary of two international ecumenical organisations. In the same year Bonhoeffer was ordained for the Lutheran ministry.

His involvement in these activities did not preclude him from church politics, especially in the formation of the *Confessing Church*. This development in German Protestantism arose in response to state interference in matters of church authority, particularly with regard to ministers of Jewish ancestry. Such interference, it was deemed in declarations at Barmen and Dahlem, constituted a *status confessionis* in which ‘the church was confronted with a crisis of conscience and had to declare its position in order to remain true to the gospel.’³⁶

Bonhoeffer found himself on the radical fringe of the Confessing Church. Though continually disappointed with what he felt to be compromising stances in respect of Reich church policies, he fought tirelessly in ecumenical circles for the recognition of the Confessing Church as the true representative of German Protestantism.

In 1935 the young theologian accepted a call from the Confessing Church to direct one of their Preachers’ Seminaries in Pomerania. Bonhoeffer was not yet thirty years old, but his theological aptitude, ecumenical work and popularity with students made him a natural candidate. When the Gestapo closed the college in 1937, a remarkable experiment in theological education had come to an end. Indeed, for a Protestant seminary of that period, Finkenwalde exhibited several unusual features. These included:

- a counter-cultural context. With the Confessing Church, Finkenwalde stood against the idolatry of the Reich church in its support of the Nazi regime. The seminary operated ‘underground’ under considerable social, political and religious duress.

³⁶ Moses, J.A. 1999. ‘Bonhoeffer’s Germany: the political context’ in *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 19.

- an intentional community. Bonhoeffer's model was 'a community, not an academy.'³⁷ At its core was the *House of Brethren*, a fellowship of graduates who lived and worked with Bonhoeffer.
- a contemplative curriculum. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation and oral confession were practiced as a vital part of theological training.

Such characteristics seem more at home in a Catholic context than in Reformed institutions, a fact that irritated some students at Finkenwalde and was cause for some teasing from rival Preachers' Seminaries. We are fortunate that Bonhoeffer's chief biographer and interpreter, Eberhard Bethge, encountered Bonhoeffer while an ordinand at Finkenwalde; there is a sensitivity to his observations during these years unavoidably lacking in the record prior to 1935. The two became firm friends, and it is to Bethge that we are indebted for much of our more intimate knowledge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bethge's biography is divided into three sections: a) the lure of theology; b) the cost of being a Christian; c) sharing Germany's destiny. In each section, Bonhoeffer is assigned an identity: respectively, 'theologian', 'Christian', and 'man for his times'³⁸. These divisions correspond roughly with Bethge's interpretation of Bonhoeffer's theological evolution. (Another, more mischievous, structure devised by Bethge along the same lines: 'prophet, pietist, plotter'.)

The first transition 'from theologian to Christian'³⁹ occurs about 1932, beginning what has been called the Discipleship phase since it centres on Bonhoeffer's work at Finkenwalde and the ensuing book *Nachfolge*. While it is this phase that interests us most, it will be most instructive to consider the development of Bonhoeffer's monastic ideas within the framework of the 'identities' mentioned above.

2.1. 'Theologian' 1906-1931

Dietrich and his twin Sabine were the last but one of eight children born in 1906 to Paula von Hase and Karl Bonhoeffer, a professor of psychiatry and neurology. Their upper-middle class family lived in Breslau (now Wroclaw in south-western Poland) until 1912 when Karl accepted an academic post in Berlin. Growing up with older siblings during the Great War, in which his brother Walter died, affected young Dietrich's sense of vocation. Reflecting later on his own generation's lack of shared experience, he observed that 'precisely as a

³⁷ Green, *Human sociality and Christian community*, 125.

³⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 677.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 202ff.

result of this encounter with their older brothers, the younger men were led to become creative, not so much to tolerate and maintain in responsible fashion what already existed, as to create, as a result of radical criticism, their own form of life.’⁴⁰

For Bonhoeffer, this form took on surprisingly religious dimensions. Although his mother had strong Brethren convictions, the family remained only nominally Christian and did not attend church. When Dietrich decided to become a theologian at age 14, he was teased by his siblings for taking ‘the path of least resistance, and that the church to which he proposed to devote himself was a poor, feeble, petty, and bourgeois institution.’⁴¹ Thus,

Bonhoeffer’s path to theology began ... in a ‘secular’ atmosphere. First came the ‘call,’ in his youthful vanity, to do something special in life. Then he plunged with intellectual curiosity into theology as a branch of knowledge. Only later did the church enter his field of vision.⁴²

What Bethge describes as ‘intellectual curiosity’ should not belie the prodigious capacity that Bonhoeffer possessed in this regard. While his family certainly encouraged independent thinking at home, it was the academy that profoundly shaped the young man’s world-view. Though he later disparaged its role in theological education⁴³, the university (first Tübingen, then Berlin) defined Bonhoeffer’s career trajectory.

At Tübingen philosophy initially preceded theology in subject importance, but it was the Evangelical Lutheran theologian Adolf Schlatter who proved the most interesting teacher. If there is one word most commonly found throughout Bonhoeffer’s writings, it is the term *concrete* – and it is with Schlatter that he ‘shared the desire to accept the concrete world as fully as possible ... No other writer besides Luther was so fully represented in Bonhoeffer’s library in later years, or so frequently consulted.’⁴⁴ As we may infer from his doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*, the problem of the concreteness of revelation would occupy Bonhoeffer for the remainder of his life.

Between his year at Tübingen and the next three at Berlin was sandwiched his visit to Rome and a remarkably positive impression of Catholicism.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 21.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 36.

⁴² *ibid.*, 44.

⁴³ See extract from his letter to Sutz in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 411.

⁴⁴ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 53f.

The Roman expression of the universality of the church and its liturgy had a tremendous impact on him, even before his encounter with Karl Barth's theology helped him gain new insights. From this perspective, his own Evangelical church at home struck him as provincial, nationalistic, and narrow-minded ... The devotion to the 'church' that he encountered in Rome – the sense of the universality of the *ecclesia* – was something new to him.⁴⁵

The concrete expression of faith found in the church at Rome impacted deeply on the Protestant student, causing him to ponder the 'sectarian' status of his own tradition as well as its present state compared with what the reformers intended. One wonders if the flowering of his later ecumenism did not have its roots here. Nevertheless,

It is no exaggeration to state that the origins of the theological themes of his early period can be discerned in his Roman experience ... His journey to Rome essentially helped him to articulate the theme of 'the church.' The motive of concreteness – of not getting lost in metaphysical speculation – was a genuine root of this approach.⁴⁶

Coming as it did shortly before the influence of Barth in 1925, Bonhoeffer's very immanent experience could not have provided a more pointed contrast to the dialectical theologian's emphasis on the transcendent. 'What is human experience compared to the majesty of God?' asked Barth – and in spite of his admiration of the Swiss theologian, it is here where Bonhoeffer's critique began:

he assumed that Barth's emphasis on the inaccessibility and free majesty of God threatened and dispelled the due emphasis on humanity's concrete, earthly plight ... he asked whether the free and inaccessible majesty of God is realized in freedom *from* the world, or whether it is not more the case that it enters *into* the world, since the freedom of God has committed itself to the human community.⁴⁷

This criticism should not be construed as a rejection of dialectical theology. On the contrary, Bonhoeffer regarded Barth as a breath of fresh air, himself as a 'Barthian thinker'⁴⁸ and is viewed today as a theologian of the neo-orthodox school. The relationship was clearly one of mutual respect. Regarding *Sanctorum Communio*, for example, Barth later wrote: 'I openly confess that I have misgivings whether I can even maintain the high level reached by Bonhoeffer, saying no less in my own words and context, and saying it no less forcefully, than did this young man so many years ago.'⁴⁹

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁸ Dramm, S. 2007. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: an introduction to his thought*. (Translated by Thomas Rice.) Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 27.

⁴⁹ Barth, K. 1960. *Church dogmatics* IV/2, 641. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 84.

It is this dissertation, completed at age 21, that brought the issue of God's transcendence and immanence into focus: Christ is *really* present in the church. Bonhoeffer understood that, though distant, God was the intimate and 'concrete encounter with one's fellows...'

The church's cultural significance and its proud place in history were not enough to convince him, despite the respect it inspired in earlier generations and the impact it had on him in Rome. But he was held by the point where revelation manifested itself in preaching, praise, prayer, or service to one another.⁵⁰

As we shall see, it is precisely these acts that inform Bonhoeffer's concept of community. But his ideas were not to be confined to the classroom. His problem 'was not how to enter the academic world, it was how to escape it. The pulpit appealed to him more than the professor's lectern.'⁵¹ After graduating *summa cum laude* from Berlin University, he began formal training for the Lutheran ministry and was posted as an assistant pastor to Barcelona in 1928.

In Spain, Bonhoeffer's encounter with Catholicism differed markedly from his experience in Rome. The priests and monks here came across as 'uneducated and sensual', prompting him to avoid seeking their acquaintance. It is within the German parish community, rather, where we might trace something of his spiritual development. His belief about the source of preaching underlines the importance he attached to the pulpit, and we see in his Barcelona sermons some of the themes that would later become fundamental to the community curriculum.

From 1 Corinthians 12:26, for example, 'he preached the church as the place where people experienced the grace of sacrifice and prayer for one another and personal confession. He referred to the poverty of the Protestant conception of the church, in comparison with the Catholic one.'⁵² In a series of evening lectures, he declared that 'Christ, instead of being the centre of our lives, has become a thing of the church, or of the religiosity of a group of people.'⁵³ Here we may discern a shift in emphasis that was to occur in Bonhoeffer's theology, from ecclesiology to Christology. Returning to Berlin as an assistant lecturer in 1929, he completed his post-doctoral thesis *Act and Being* in which he formulates the idea of 'Jesus, the man for others'. Initially, the concept applied solely to the church, but – as Bonhoeffer's Christology developed – it became meaningful in relation to the world.

⁵⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 84.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 96.

⁵² *ibid.*, 113.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 116.

It was during this period that he began to read the novels of French Catholic writer George Bernanos, well known for his book *The Diary of a Country Priest*. The spiritual turmoil of Bernanos' characters seemed to personify Bonhoeffer's own internal struggles – 'the priest and saint as the chosen target of the tempter, the man barely able to resist the alternative assaults of desperation and pride. Had he not long been familiar with the call to serve God in a special way, and with the longing to know one's own devotion in early years?'⁵⁴ During an illness in early 1937 Bonhoeffer again read Bernanos, recommending his work to his students thus:

You must surely know Bernanos' books? When the priests speak in them, their words carry weight. The reason is that they are not the products of some sort of linguistic reflection or observation but simply of daily, personal contact with the crucified Jesus Christ. This is the depth from which a word must come if it is to carry weight.⁵⁵

In 1930, Bonhoeffer travelled to the United States as part of an exchange-student fellowship. He spent a year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, forming several lasting friendships. One of his new friends, Jean Laserre, presented a compelling view of the Sermon on the Mount. This insight introduced Bonhoeffer to a newfound pacifism and opened vistas for ecumenical work. Writes Bethge,

The later Bonhoeffer of *Discipleship* and the church struggle did not forget what he learned in New York. His stay in America reinforced his basic interest in the concrete reality of the word of God. His problem now was how this concreteness was to be developed ... From this point on, the struggle would be to find an answer to this question.⁵⁶

While Bethge assigns the identity of 'Theologian' to this stage of Bonhoeffer's development, it appears nevertheless to have been as much influenced by his own *experiences* as by theology: for example, the effect of the First World War on his family, his sense of vocation, his holiday in Rome, his reading of Bernanos, his preaching in Spain. Is it possible that here already, the concrete reality of personal experience was established as one of the poles circumscribing the pendular motion of his life?

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 139f.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 562f.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 166.

2.2. 'Christian' 1931-1940

Back at Berlin University, Bonhoeffer busied himself not only on the academic faculty as an assistant lecturer, but also as a student chaplain and youth secretary to two ecumenical organisations. On a more personal level,

something occurred during these months that is hard for us to perceive fully, though its effects are plain. He himself would never have called it a conversion. But a change occurred in him that led to all that was to follow during this phase of his life – *Discipleship*, the Finkenwalde experiment in communal living, his attitude to the ecumenical movement, and the church struggle.⁵⁷

This phase would continue until 1939. Of course, it coincided with a time of huge political upheaval in Germany, a period during which Bonhoeffer questioned the basis of the church's authority vis-à-vis that of false authorities. Perhaps the church

might be better served by silence than by the comments and marginal observations about God and the world that it was constantly tempted to make. He took an early interest in a 'qualified silence.' To his students this was a completely alien point of view, but to him the categories of 'authority,' 'concrete commandment,' and 'qualified silence' of the church meant the same thing: the risk of preaching.⁵⁸

The internal change in Bonhoeffer referred to above was noticeable from about 1932, in several respects:

- he now regularly attended church
- he practiced a meditative approach to Scripture
- he spoke of oral confession as act to be practised
- he alluded to a communal life of obedience and prayer
- he quoted from the Sermon on the Mount as a statement to be acted upon
- he began taking a stand for Christian pacifism⁵⁹

From correspondence which can be dated to this time, it is clear that Bonhoeffer had found 'his niche', his true calling – and that this discovery was a source of inner strength, joy and peace. With the high standards expected of his university students, he soon attracted a core group around him – what Bethge has called the 'Bonhoeffer circle'. To this group, their

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 174.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 204.

teacher was not merely an interesting lecturer; he related far more personally. In 1932, for example, he took them on retreat to Prebelow and Biesenthal. Here,

they talked theology, made hesitant attempts at spiritual exercises, went for long walks, and listened to Bonhoeffer's collection of Negro spirituals. It was the first time they had spoken about things like forming fellowship, committing themselves to organized spiritual life ... These were the hesitant beginnings of what later took shape in Finkenwalde and in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*.⁶⁰

In the classroom, Bonhoeffer continually sought to make concrete doctrines that were abstract.

Together with the reformers and Karl Barth, he wanted to learn to spell out and teach what 'justification,' 'revelation,' and the 'word of God' were. In the process, however, his interpretation of all three concepts immediately became something tangible as 'peace,' 'commandment,' and 'connection to the church.' Several years later they would be given a different name, remaining for him what they had been: 'justice,' 'discipleship,' and 'life together.'⁶¹

He sought the same effect in his preaching. 'One can't preach the Gospel tangibly enough. A truly evangelical sermon must be like offering a child a fine red apple or offering a thirsty man a cool glass of water and then saying: Do you want it?'⁶² Likewise for his ecumenical work, concrete resolutions were required. At a joint youth conference of the *World Alliance* and the *Ecumenical Council* held at Gland, Geneva in August 1932, Bonhoeffer's influence is apparent: 'the church must formulate very precise demands in the name of Jesus, no generalities; judgement has to be pronounced on capitalism and nationalism ... We need a new church today for the accomplishment of such divine messages.'⁶³

By now it should be clear that anchoring Bonhoeffer's thought were two poles, held in creative tension: 'the eschatological majesty of revelation and the relevance of the real world.'⁶⁴ The community of faith consists of the 'children of the earth, who refuse to separate themselves from the world and who have no special proposals to offer for its improvement.'⁶⁵ Here, in incipient form, is Hauerwas and Willimon's central thesis in *Resident Aliens*: instead of trying to reform secular culture, the church should focus on developing the Christian life.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 208.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 219.

⁶² Extract from Bonhoeffer's letter to Hildebrandt, dated 29 May 1932. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 234

⁶³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 252.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 254.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

And yet in 1933, a watershed year for Germany, Bonhoeffer understood that it was precisely in the world that the church needed to take decisive action.

The time for compromise was disappearing quickly, and ... the time for a clear yes or no was coming. In his writings of 1932 and 1933 Bonhoeffer proposed to his own church and to the ecumenical movement that they should rediscover 'council,' 'heresy,' 'confession,' and 'doctrinal decision.'⁶⁶

A year later, his proposals were realised as the Barmen and Dahlem synods gave birth to the Confessing Church. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer was still regarded as a visionary and his positions simply too radical. Instructed by the Young Reformation movement to produce a confession⁶⁷ to counter the German Christians, Bonhoeffer saw his draft diluted so much that he declined to participate further. Instead, he took it as partial confirmation of his decision to accept an invitation to pastor a German-speaking congregation in London.

Prior to taking leave of his students in October 1933, he presented them with his essay *What must the student of theology do today?* In it, he warns the aspirant theologian that 'the worldliness which he likes to assume may yet serve him very ill, and it is really quite impossible to see how unmitigated worldliness can be regarded as the decisive criterion of the good theologian.'⁶⁸ Such a statement, indicative of his growing anti-liberalism, seems to contradict his profound endorsement of 'worldliness' during the final years. Here, however, it has none of that connotation. It looks ahead, rather, to a more pietistic interpretation: discipleship.

In London, Bonhoeffer found that he could not distance himself from the political tumult in Berlin. Indeed, he was caught between his own two poles.

Despite his wholehearted involvement, his colleagues in the Confessing church viewed him as an outsider because of his constant concern with the Sermon on the Mount. Yet among his ecumenical friends, to whom the Sermon on the Mount was of prime importance, he was isolated because of his insistence on the confession and the repudiation of heresy.⁶⁹

In July 1934, Bonhoeffer was invited by the Confessing Church to direct one of their Preachers' Seminaries. Given his concern for meaningful theological education together

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 289.

⁶⁷ The so-called *Bethel Confession*.

⁶⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 322.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 372.

with his ongoing fears for the Confessing Church in Germany, it is not surprising that he accepted the post. In a September letter to his friend Erwin Sutz, he wrote: ‘The entire education of the younger generation of theologians belongs today in church cloister-like schools, in which pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount and worship are taken seriously – as they never are ... at the university.’⁷⁰

Before returning to Germany, Bonhoeffer undertook a brief tour of several Anglican seminaries and communities. ‘He wanted to gain an impression of other traditions before beginning his own attempt at communal life.’⁷¹ At the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield, he participated in the daily praying of Psalm 119 – a passage that became Bonhoeffer’s most quoted text. He also visited the Society of the Sacred Mission in Kelham, the Methodist college in Richmond, and the Quaker centre at Selly Oak, Birmingham.

The closer this new task approached, the more it became a focal point for everything that had preoccupied Bonhoeffer in recent years: a theology of the Sermon on the Mount, a community in service and spiritual exercises, a witness to passive resistance and ecumenical openness.⁷²

If Bonhoeffer had earlier ‘found his calling’ in a new spiritual identity, then it was at Finkenwalde where that identity found the most fulfilment. It is here where Bethge met Bonhoeffer as part of the first group to undergo training there.⁷³

The small intimate circle of students enabled him to devote all his energies to his new theological theme of discipleship, and his new task was begun under the oversight of the church. Bonhoeffer had reflected about communal life for four years; now he could put his ideas into practice. His theological enthusiasm was unfolding in a setting marked by a practical piety.⁷⁴

It is helpful here to consider the background of the so-called Preachers’ Seminary. Because church ministers traditionally received their theological *education* at state universities, the importance of academic study usually took precedence over ministerial *training*. The churches, aware of the need for further training, began to set up their own seminaries in competition with the powerful universities whose students, in turn, regarded the seminary training as a rather poor substitute. However, due to the crises in university education during the mid-thirties, the seminaries came to the fore and – largely by virtue of their relatively

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 411.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 411f.

⁷² *ibid.*, 412f.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 425.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 419.

unknown status – provided the church with the necessary training. Comprising two courses per year, the seminaries had a fresh intake of ordinands every six months. They prospered for between two to three years before the state rendered them ‘illegal’.

The next chapter will examine the years at Finkenwalde in more detail, especially the ‘House of Brethren’, but it is noteworthy here to consider the curriculum that Bonhoeffer established from the outset. Each day began and ended with a lengthy service, the morning one followed by a half-hour meditation. The service was conducted at the dinner table, and was constituted by the following elements:

- choral psalm and hymn selected for that day
- Old Testament lesson
- set verse from a hymn, sung daily for several weeks
- New Testament lesson
- a time of spontaneous prayer
- recital of the Lord’s Prayer

Another set verse from a hymn concluded the service. Scripture reading was according to the old Reformed practice of *lectio continua*, Bonhoeffer believing that ‘this sequence of readings and prayers was the most natural and suitable form of worship for theologians.’⁷⁵ He preached only on Saturdays.

The daily routine was strictly observed, though Bonhoeffer provided a ‘pressure-valve’ in opportunity for recreation and vigorous discussion. Time for the latter was set aside one evening a week. On Sundays there was no class but organized games. The students adhered to the regimen for the most part, but opposition was encountered when Bonhoeffer wanted to begin the monastic practice of reading aloud during meals. In all this he led more by example than by direct suggestion.

In matters of syllabus, Finkenwalde exhibited little difference from the other Preachers’ Seminaries. The notable exception was the lecture series on discipleship. ‘After only a few hours newcomers realised that this was the heart of everything, and they realised they were

⁷⁵ The routine described here is from Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 428f.

witnessing a theological event that would stimulate every area of their professional life.’⁷⁶
More will be said on this subject below.

Though Bonhoeffer himself was interested in liturgy, it played a minor role in the syllabus.

The indifference of most liturgists toward church politics, particularly those in the Berneuchen movement, made them suspect to the Confessing church and they were often judged harshly. ‘Only he who cries out for the Jews can sing the Gregorian chant,’ Bonhoeffer once remarked to his ordinands in this connection.⁷⁷

The Berneuchen movement was an apolitical, pietistic Lutheran fellowship that arose in Germany after the First World War. Bethge records that one of its chief leaders, Wilhelm Stählin, corresponded with Bonhoeffer in September 1933, hoping to collaborate on the following:

‘plans for a cloistered community’ (‘disciplined community life,’ ‘physical work,’ ‘a ritualistic life with the practice of meditation’). At the time however, it sounded to Bonhoeffer like too much emphasis on a working community and too little on the Sermon on the Mount. Stählin wrote: ‘To reach an agreement with you on working together personally with young people would be much more important for me than this church politics.’⁷⁸

Since Bonhoeffer brooked no divorce between life in community and life in the world, it is not surprising that this correspondence proceeded no further – though he may have had it in mind when he wrote in *Life Together*, several years later, that the Christian ‘belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work.’⁷⁹

Homiletics was treated with the utmost seriousness. Any sermon part of the worship service was not analysed, but listened to ‘in all humility’. As for the preacher, ‘the Gospel of mercy is concrete and imperious without any additions or omissions. Of course this certain word is embedded in the existence of those who speak it, and this may be credible or unreliable. But prayer and meditation can do something for credibility.’⁸⁰ Recalling Bonhoeffer’s analogy of holding out the red apple above, he now insisted that

⁷⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 441.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 441.

⁷⁸ Endnote 100 in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 983.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, D. 1954. *Life together*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 17.

⁸⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 442.

the preacher already has the red apple and gives it out. Therefore, he said: 'Do not try to make the Bible relevant. Its relevance is axiomatic ... Do not defend God's Word, but testify to it ... Trust to the Word. It is a ship loaded to the very limits of its capacity!'⁸¹

The preacher's normal procedure of concretely 'applying' Scripture was thus discouraged, since – as Bonhoeffer pointed out – 'God alone is concrete ... the concrete situation is the substance within which the Word of God speaks; it is the object, not the subject, of concretion.'⁸²

That the seminary director found the time, while training ordinands and travelling extensively on church and ecumenical business, to write the book *Nachfolge* – translated into English as *The Cost of Discipleship* – must testify to his extraordinary productivity. Much of the book is based on the discipleship lectures referred to above. Wrestling with the nature of concrete 'faith', Bonhoeffer debated what the reformers had to say on this issue, concluding (with Kierkegaard) that

'today Luther would say the opposite of what he had said then' in order to state the same essential message. Once, faith had meant leaving the cloister. Now, faith might mean a reopening of the cloister; and faith could also mean entering the world of politics.⁸³

Note that Bonhoeffer can describe the manifestation of faith as 'reopening the cloister' (monastic life) and 'entering politics' (activist life) *in the same breath*. For him, these realms – kept apart by many centuries of tradition – are not mutually exclusive.

With the establishment in 1935 of an intentional, residential community at Finkenwalde, the so-called *Bruderhaus* or 'House of Brethren', an ambition dear to Bonhoeffer was realized. Although there existed Protestant precedents in Germany, those fellowships had not attempted to actually live together and 'it had certainly never occurred to them to abandon the traditional form of parish ministry in order to revive the classical vows.'⁸⁴

As we have seen, Bonhoeffer showed an early interest in Catholic spirituality and had already experimented with retreats at Prebelow and Biesenthal. With his recent visits to the Anglican communities, it is clear that he had in mind some firm communitarian ideas (*cf.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*, 443.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 455.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 461.

chapter III B). It was in January 1935, while still in London, that he expressed himself quite passionately on the subject to his eldest brother Karl-Friedrich:

I would only achieve true inner clarity and sincerity by really starting to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. This is the only source of strength that can blow all this stuff and nonsense sky-high, in a fireworks display that will leave nothing behind but one or two charred remains. The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this.⁸⁵

Prior to the formal constitution of the 'House of Brethren', several spiritual disciplines were already in practice – including meditation and confession – at Finkenwalde. Before the day's work began, silent meditation for half an hour was expected after breakfast. The meditation centred on a few agreed-upon Bible verses unconnected with any agenda. Despite initial failure, the practice continued with one concession – a time of communal meditation held once a week where silence was not mandatory.

The strongest incentive to the hesitant students was Bonhoeffer's own manner of prayer ... He was convinced that prayer could be taught and learned, yet neither the university faculties nor seminaries included prayer in their curricula. Bonhoeffer's daily example, however, gradually began to bear fruit.⁸⁶

More controversial was the monthly practice of confession, encouraged on the day before Sunday communion. Bonhoeffer suggested that private, informal confession be made to each other or to himself, and that pastors preach on the subject once a year. Private confession, he maintained,

enabled people to unburden their consciences to one another instead of to God. The absolution that was offered in God's name carried more conviction than the absolution after general confession, fraught as this was with the danger of self-deception and self-forgiveness.⁸⁷

The presence of the listening Christ in the confessor, said Bonhoeffer, was more important than the question of the confessor's personal trustworthiness. This is, of course, established Catholic doctrine.

Towards the end of the first summer at Finkenwalde, he put forward the idea that a group of ordinands stay behind during the following semester in order to help him work with the next

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 462.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 464.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 465f.

intake of ordinands. With those who wished to stay, he drafted a proposal for a ‘community house’ and requested permission from the Confessing Church authorities to release candidates for this service. In support of his proposal, the following reasons were given:

- the goal of proclamation is better maintained by a community than an individual
- the goal of discipleship is best demonstrated by a ‘concrete experiment in communal living’
- the church struggle now requires a lifestyle best equipped by living in community
- the community would provide a much-needed facility for spiritual retreat⁸⁸

With some reluctance, the proposal was accepted and six young men remained to help Bonhoeffer at Finkenwalde. Recalls Bethge, who was selected as one of them: ‘The communal life envisaged in the proposal was to take the form of a daily order of prayer, mutual exhortation, free personal confession, common theological work, and a very simple communal life.’⁸⁹

Inevitably, this community experienced turnover – not least because of the war; some members were killed in active service. It was financed through a common purse, with Bonhoeffer providing the largest portion. And, while it is clear that the House of Brethren respected the vows of classical monasticism, ‘these were never explicitly taken, nor were they envisioned for the immediate future.’⁹⁰ Celibacy was not enjoined, with several ordinands marrying soon after their training at Finkenwalde. Similarly, it is one of the features of the new monasticism that the traditional vows are dynamically reinterpreted to suit the *telos* of the intentional community.

For all its independent activity, the seminary located and understood itself firmly within the Confessing denomination. Thus, as pressure came to bear all the more on their church – from without (the state, the official Reich church, the ‘German Christians’⁹¹) and from within (internal cracks in response to, for example, threats of revoking state subsidies) – it is

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 466f.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 467.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 468.

⁹¹ Considered ‘the Nazi party of the church’, the *Deutsche Christen* movement was held by the Confessing Church to have betrayed the gospel by replacing Christ with a creed of ‘blood, soil and the Thousand-Year Reich.’ Green, *Human sociality and Christian community*, 120. According to the slogan: ‘one nation, one Reich, one church’, the German Christians wished to ‘establish a German national church with a *Reichsbischof* as its ‘Führer.’ Pangritz, A. 1999. ‘Who is Jesus Christ, for us, today?’ in *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (Ed. de Gruchy, J.W.) Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 139. Intentionally racist, they repudiated the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.

interesting to note the response at Finkenwalde. Far from distancing themselves from the political ‘hot potato’ issues, the students together with people from neighbouring areas constituted themselves as a Confessing congregation. In 1936, those present

signed the Confessing church’s card of personal commitment – at the very moment when such things had been forbidden. The Finkenwalde Confessing congregation that was founded that day maintained its independence until well into the war, long after the seminary had been disbanded.⁹²

Also in 1936, Bonhoeffer took advantage of his ecumenical connections in obtaining an invitation for his student body to visit Sweden. The voyage was regarded by the Reich church foreign office as potentially subversive and further strained relations with the Confessing church in general and Bonhoeffer in particular. The party journeyed by sea, arriving in Uppsala in early March. His stance vis-à-vis the current political dispensation in Germany was articulated in his lectures on church politics and the Christology of discipleship:

It is no longer possible, as it was in the past, to lead a bourgeois life and a Christian life at the same time. Rather, three things are demanded of Christian youth today: confessing Christ and with this the renunciation of all other gods in this world; discipleship of Christ in simple and modest obedience to his Word; communion in the community of Christ which is the church.⁹³

After each course at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer conducted a joint retreat of new students together with those who had just finished, ‘in the hope of influencing the spirit of the new candidates from the onset.’⁹⁴ Some of the articles he wrote for discussion at these retreats are still extant:

- April 1936: ‘The rebuilding of Jerusalem according to Ezra and Nehemiah’ (Bible study); ‘The question of the *church-community*⁹⁵’ (lecture)
- October 1936: ‘Timothy, the servant in the house of God’ (Bible study); ‘Teaching plan for confirmation students’ (lecture)
- April 1937: ‘Timothy’ (Bible study); review of Hermann Sasse’s book *What does it mean to be Lutheran?*; ‘The power of the keys and community discipline in the New Testament’ (lecture)

⁹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 502.

⁹³ *ibid.*, 509.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 517.

⁹⁵ My italics. This phrase best translates Bonhoeffer’s word *Gemeinde*. See Green’s comments below (chapter III A).

- June 1937: ‘The power of the keys and community discipline in the New Testament’; ‘The confessional question in light of the Halle resolutions.’
- June 1938 [in Zingst]: ‘Temptation’ (Bible study)⁹⁶

The state persecution of colleagues and past students became concrete issues with which Bonhoeffer deliberately identified the seminary. Without fail, he ‘mentioned the name of each victim ... during prayers, devotions, and meditation. Everyone in Finkenwalde learned to concern himself like a brother with at least one of these cases, and eventually to regard such incidents as nothing out of the ordinary.’⁹⁷

June 1936 saw the seminary conduct a mission to eastern Pomerania, sending four-man teams into villages for one week. The days were occupied with visitation and school visits, while the evening church-meetings were planned around each team-member spending not more than ten minutes in the pulpit. The meetings were well attended, exceeding all expectations.

Wherever they happened to be, the four brothers followed the same pattern of morning devotions and meditation that was practiced in Finkenwalde. In Bonhoeffer’s proposal for a House of Brethren he had declared that the content and actual practice of preaching needed mutual help and fellowship. This phrase now became a practical experience for the whole seminary.⁹⁸

In this fashion, despite numerous dangers, Bethge reports that 36 parishes were visited by the time of Finkenwalde’s closure. What impresses one is the team cohesion engendered by personal meditative practice away from the seminary.

A 1937 newsletter to dispersed Finkenwalde alumni reveals how their spiritual fellowship transcended geographical location:

During these days of trial for our Confessing church we often think of you all and pray more intensely for you, particularly for those who are very much on their own. It is now, especially, that we should rejoice in our community and remain loyal to one another in daily intercession. During the period of meditation please keep in mind the names of all the brethren who were with you here so that none is excluded from our common prayer.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 518.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 539.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 543.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 581.

Between the lectures, devotional curriculum, the House of Brethren, church politics, ecumenical work, retreats and evangelistic outreaches, two and a half years of community life passed swiftly. Sadly, the day came in September 1937 when the doors of the seminary were sealed by the Nazi secret police. Ordinand training continued underground in a different mode, the so-called ‘collective vicariates’, but it

precluded any continuation of the House of Brethren’s communal life. Bonhoeffer’s dearest wish, the goal of which was not ‘the seclusion of a monastery, but a place of the deepest inward concentration for service outside,’ was never to get beyond the first, rudimentary stage.¹⁰⁰

Would *Life Together* have been written if the seminary had not been shut down? This little book, written in the several weeks following Finkenwalde’s closure, describes the principles underlying the House of Brethren’s way of life. In contrast to his other writings, it became widely-read during Bonhoeffer’s lifetime. Bethge describes its publication as ‘sensational’, perhaps due to its novelty: ‘Finkenwalde had revealed a weak spot within Protestantism and, moreover, had sought practical solutions where others felt helpless.’¹⁰¹

Here were the outlines of a living Protestant community, not revived in opposition to or outside the churches of the Reformation (as had happened in Herrnhut¹⁰²), but within the church itself, undertaken and upheld out of a renewed understanding of the church. In the midst of the great crisis and weakness besieging the privileged ministry of the *Volkskirche*, Finkenwalde offered an alternative.¹⁰³

Bethge wonders how Bonhoeffer’s monastic ideas might have developed ‘under more normal conditions’ – and even observed simulacra in the final stage of Bonhoeffer’s life: ‘in his thinking about the arcane discipline in which Christians surrender their privileges, pray, study, and act in ways that are not for everyone, nor intended to make the headlines.’¹⁰⁴ This discipline will be considered in more detail below; suffice to say that the spiritual exercises practiced at Finkenwalde were also to Bonhoeffer’s benefit, particularly during the bleak years in prison.

After 1937, theological training continued at the vicarages of Köslin and Schlawe in eastern Pomerania according to the new method of collective vicariates. By enrolling as ‘apprentice vicars’, ordinands avoided association with the banned Confessing seminaries and could still

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 469.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

¹⁰² See chapter IV A.

¹⁰³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 469f.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 470.

undergo instruction. Despite persistent rumours about Bonhoeffer's monastic style, 'work and meditation, worship, homiletics, and examining the underlying concepts of the New Testament – all this was carried on in the small undistracted circle of the collective pastorates almost more intensively than the spacious house in Finkenwalde.'¹⁰⁵ Enforced military conscription ended this arrangement in March 1940, but in this way five more courses had been added to the five completed at Finkenwalde.

Bonhoeffer's proclivity for Psalm 119 found expression in a meditation he wrote towards the end of this period, 'in the last place he taught theology and lived a spiritual life in community.'¹⁰⁶ In view of his impending theology developed at Tegel, and of our later engagement with *Resident Aliens*, we find the quotation pertinent.

The earth that nourishes me has a right to my work and my strength. It is not fitting that I should despise the earth on which I have my life; I owe it faithfulness and gratitude. I must not dream away my earthly life with thoughts of heaven and thereby evade my lot – that I must be a sojourner and a stranger – and with it God's call into this world of strangers. There is a very godless homesickness for the other world, and it will certainly not produce any home-coming. I am to be a sojourner, with everything that entails. I should not close my heart indifferently to earth's problems, sorrows and joys; and I am to wait patiently for the redemption of the divine promise – really wait, and not rob myself of it in advance by wishing and dreaming.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, Bonhoeffer never settled down after Finkenwalde. After the closure of the collective vicariates, he found himself in a constant state of transit, between the church struggle in Berlin, ecumenical efforts in England and even a brief, inopportune visit to New York in mid-1939 (the same month, incidentally, when Thomas Merton was in that city). During this last journey just before the war it is notable how often he agonised over the plight of 'the brothers', as his letters and diary testify:

- 6 June – *My thoughts alternate between you and the future ... Greetings to all the brethren; you will now be having evening prayers!*
- 8 June – *First of all I beg this of you, the brothers who are still at home. I do not want to be spared in your thoughts.*
- 13 June – *With all this, only Germany is missing, the brothers.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 594.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 620.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

- 14 June – *Prayers. I was almost overcome by the short prayer – the whole family knelt down – in which we thought of the German brothers.*
- 15 June – *Since yesterday evening I haven't been able to stop thinking about Germany. I would not have thought it possible that at my age, after so many years abroad, one could get so dreadfully homesick.*¹⁰⁸

Neither did he, on his hasty return, neglect to encourage the brothers – most of them by now already at the front – on the eve of WWII. It should be kept in mind that until Bonhoeffer's arrest, all Finkenwaldians received a regular newsletter containing 'weekly texts for meditation' (*Losungen*) and occasional encouragement for them to keep up the practice.¹⁰⁹ Now, Bonhoeffer wrote to his former students

about the death that belongs to us and the death that does not belong to us, about a 'death from without' and a 'death from within': 'We may pray that death from without does not come to us till we have been made ready for it through this inner death; for our death is really only the gateway to the perfect love of God.'¹¹⁰

This tender sense of community with his 'brethren' shows us how highly Bonhoeffer esteemed the relationships forged in life together at Finkenwalde. The absent brothers seemed as much present with him now than during their years in community then.

We have referred already to Bethge's partitioning of the Bonhoeffer story. When Bethge says that in 1931-32 the 'theologian' became a 'Christian', he does not mean that Bonhoeffer ceased being a theologian. Likewise, in the second transition 'the theologian *and* Christian became a man for his times.'¹¹¹ The change is more a 'nesting' of categories, or the realisation of another dimension, than a total metamorphosis.

Nevertheless, the internal change in Bonhoeffer was profound. In his essay *After ten years*, he wrote:

We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learned the arts of equivocation and pretence; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 650 and 652.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 464.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, 661.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 677 (my italics).

¹¹² *ibid.*, 676.

If it was in 1932 that he found his calling, it was in 1939 that he discovered his destiny.

Comparing the latter phases in Bonhoeffer's life, Bethge sums up the differences thus:

The year 1932 had placed Bonhoeffer in a world where things were comparatively clear-cut, where it was a matter of confessing and denying – in his case, of confessing the one church for the whole world and denying its betrayal to nationalist particularism ... In 1939 he entered the difficult world of assessing what was expedient – of success and failure, tactics and camouflage. The certainty of his calling in 1932 now became an acceptance of the uncertain, the incomplete, and the provisional ... To want to be a Christian, a timeless disciple – that now became a costly privilege. To become engaged for his times, where he stood, was far more open to misinterpretation, less glorious, more confined. Yet this alone was what it now meant to be a Christian. The possibility of 'life together' ended forever in the spring of 1940...¹¹³

The poles peculiar to Bonhoeffer which first came into view in his identity as 'Theologian' acquire further definition in his second identity as 'Christian'. Indeed, there are now multiple tensions: between God's majestic revelation and the world's concrete reality, between a singular pacifism and the prophetic necessity to 'name and shame'. Given the tumultuous change in almost every sphere of Germany in the 1930s, and his own incessant travels, it should not surprise us that Bonhoeffer yearned for a still centre – an 'eye', as it were, in the hurricane.

Spiritually, he found this centre in a steady deepening of his faith. Given his family and academic background, the pietistic extent of this 'deepening' is quite remarkable. Monastic practices not only enhanced this sense of spiritual stability, but improved the quality of his ministry – so much so, that Bonhoeffer soon realised its value for the church in general and her ministers in particular.

More tangibly, the still centre was found in the training opportunity at Finkenwalde. Here, for a time, in his 'one and a half rooms' with his books now shared with students, he could operate freely. It is notable that after the seminary's closure in 1937, Bethge reports that its director never again 'settled down' – even while continuing to encourage his 'brothers' in their own changes of fortune. Neither were his books ever again collected in one place.

For Bonhoeffer, it is true to say that as Finkenwalde centred his ministry, his ministry centred Finkenwalde.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, 677f.

2.3. 'Man for his times' 1940-1945

How might one evaluate the 'success' of the contemplative curriculum at Finkenwalde? This question is raised directly by Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* in terms of as a personal 'test of meditation', in which he posits the unchristian environment as the arena of Christian testing:

This is the place where we find out whether the Christian's meditation has led him into the unreal, from which he awakens in terror when he returns to the workaday world, or whether it has led him into a real contact with God, from which he emerges strengthened and purified ... One who returns to the Christian family fellowship after fighting the battle of the day brings with him the blessing of his aloneness, but he himself receives anew the blessing of the fellowship.¹¹⁴

Ironically, it was the German front line that turned out to be a literal 'arena'. Bonhoeffer's challenge is answered in the form of letters sent from his students, now in active service:

I have meditated when I found time, and when that failed, I have learned texts by heart. In that way they have often opened out at an unexpected depth. One has to live with the texts, and then they unfold. I am very grateful now for your having kept us to it...

You know that I am one of your very grateful pupils; the psalms that I first began to understand in Finkenwalde accompany me through the valley of the shadow of these weeks...

I dream of the 'calm and quiet life in all godliness and integrity.'¹¹⁵

One wonders if such responses to his monastic style made Bonhoeffer feel uncomfortable in view of his much-changed personal situation. Perhaps we can detect this unease in his admonition to the brothers-turned-soldiers: 'We should not let ourselves be made slaves. God knows your present life and finds his way to you even in the most tense and tedious days, if you can no longer find your way to him.'¹¹⁶

Another indicator of the change in Bonhoeffer was his appreciation for the 'world,'¹¹⁷ a theme that became key to his new project: *Ethics*. Despite spending three years working on it, including several months at Ettal (a Benedictine monastery in south Bavaria), it was never completed. It is here where he conceived the difference between what is Ultimate and what is Penultimate, and formulated new ideas regarding natural theology – but these developments fall beyond our scope.

¹¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 88f.

¹¹⁵ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 703.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Cf. his meditation on Ps 119 above.

In between these bursts of theological work, and the tasks assigned to him by the Confessing church, Bonhoeffer allowed himself – in his capacity as an officer in military intelligence – to be drawn into the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. After his arrest in 1943 on the charge of an ‘anti-military’ exemption, he was imprisoned at Tegel prison for one and a half years. Serious evidence was then found incriminating him in the assassination plot, prompting his relocation to more secure confinement. It was at Tegel, however, where Bonhoeffer – all the while continuing his daily meditative routine – began work on a new theology.

While we will not delve into his nonreligious interpretation of biblical terms in a ‘world come of age,’ we will visit its counterpoint: his idea of the ‘arcane discipline.’ A category under his main question: *Who is Christ for us today?*, the phrase is encountered only twice in his prison letters – yet, Bethge believes the notion is key.

It was predictable that he would be interested in the early Christian practice of excluding the uninitiated, the unbaptised catechumens, from the second part of the liturgy in which the communion was celebrated and the Nicene Creed sung. This was the origin of the ‘arcane discipline.’ As students at Finkenwalde, we were surprised when Bonhoeffer sought this piece of early church history of which we had never taken any notice.¹¹⁸

Basically, the question is this: in a nonreligious interpretation of God, in a world come of age, how and where do worship and prayer fit in? In his desire to preserve *authentic* worship, Bonhoeffer insisted that the discipline of prayer, meditation, worship, and coming together was as essential as food and drink – but also ‘as much an arcane [private] affair as are the central events of life, which are not suitable for a missionary demonstration.’¹¹⁹

While the crucial categories of ‘creation’, ‘fall’, reconciliation’, ‘the last things’ and ‘resurrection’ continue to be important, they no longer speak effectively in a world come of age. Thus, ‘the church should remain silent until there is again a call for them and the precious content of its words once more becomes compelling.’¹²⁰ No matter how loudly the church speaks, in whatever terms, relationship between God’s word and God’s world can only be ‘Pentecostally’ achieved. An arcane discipline protects the *mysteries* of the faith from religious desecration. In Bethge’s opinion,

¹¹⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 881.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, 882.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

These 'mysteries' are creative events of the Holy Spirit, but they become 'religious' objects, a 'positivism of revelation,' if they are offered without reason, forced on people and given away cheaply ... It can also be argued, from the other side, that arcane discipline protects the world just as much from violation by religion. Thus the arcane discipline acquires the important function of protecting the nonreligious interpretation of Christianity from relapsing into religion.¹²¹

Does this mean we can understand the *disciplina arcani* as a place of retreat from the nonreligious world? No, because 'there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ. There is no place to which the Christian can withdraw from the world, be this outwardly or in the realm of the inner life.'¹²²

Jörg Martin Meier has put the concept like this: 'by worldliness Bonhoeffer testifies to Christ as the real one, and by arcane discipline as the present one.'¹²³ Thus, says Bonhoeffer, 'whoever sets eyes on the body of Jesus Christ in faith can never again speak of the world as though it were lost, as though it were separated from Christ; he can never again with clerical arrogance set himself apart from the world.'¹²⁴

Paradoxically, this has to be understood within the realm of the arcane: 'we enter the 'sphere' of the arcane in order that there should be an end to spatial divisions. In other words, the 'ultimate' is praised with the initiates gathered together, so that in the 'penultimate' stage there can be a share in godlessness.'¹²⁵ Says Oskar Hammelsbeck:

Our bond with Christ is arcane, in that, as chosen and privileged ones, we do not make this a matter of privilege and a special religious life. It is part of this *arcanum* that I support preaching, baptism and the Eucharist, that I worship, confess and give praise within the congregation.¹²⁶

Worldliness and arcane discipline are therefore critically interconnected. To have any significance, each requires the other. As Bethge writes:

If they do not mutually correct each other they become meaningless and banal. Arcane discipline without worldliness is a ghetto, and worldliness without arcane

¹²¹ *ibid.*, 882f.

¹²² Bonhoeffer, D. 1995. *Ethics*. Translated by Neville Horton Smith. New York: Simon & Schuster, 198. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 883.

¹²³ Meier, J.M. 1966. 'Weltlichkeit und Arkandisziplin bei Dietrich Bonhoeffer,' in *Theologische Existenz Heute*, no.136, 79. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 883.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, 884.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Hammelsbeck, O. 1969. 'Zu Bonhoeffers Gedanken über die mündig gewordene Welt' in *Die Mündige Welt*. Vol. 1, 55f. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 884.

discipline is nothing more than a boulevard. In isolation, arcane discipline becomes liturgical monasticism and nonreligious interpretation an intellectual game.

As ‘initiates’ in the *arcanum*, then, in the central mysteries of faith, praise, thanksgiving and communion fellowship, we are sent into the world to share in it, standing side by side with worldly men and women and existing for them (being for others). ‘They can make the sacrifice of being silent and incognito because they trust the Holy Spirit, who knows and brings on the time of the proclamation.’¹²⁷ Jesus is thus, in answer to Bonhoeffer’s main question, the ‘man for others.’

Letters and Papers from Prison was published in 1952, and though critique of the new theology was widespread, for a decade or so not much was written about it. Since then, of course, this lack has been made up. Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer’s writings

had their greatest effect wherever there was experimentation in small groups, wherever new parish structures and forms of political solidarity were being tried out, wherever the bastions of the *Volkskirche* and of social privilege were abandoned, and where questions of atheism and cooperation with non-Christians were accepted as part of the humanisation of life together.¹²⁸

With the onset of World War II, the Axis front was suddenly thrust forward as the arena and measure of Finkenwalde’s success. While this development must have been long expected by Bonhoeffer, everything changed once more. For his students, the discipline of meditation became a means of facilitating physical survival rather than spiritual enlightenment. For their mentor, as he reflected on what the church might look like in a post-war Germany, his theology swung away from a private discipleship to a more public arena: the world. In this secular arena, discipline was still required to pray and to worship God authentically.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter has, in the main, explored Bonhoeffer’s personal development through a critical period of Germany’s history. The thorny issue of the church in relation to the secular powers posed formidable challenges that continued to vex him throughout his youth and adulthood. It may be said that, indeed, this world’s concrete reality formed the ‘pole’ from which he swung theologically, communally, and – most tragically – literally. Was monastic obedience the rope binding him to that pole?

¹²⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 884.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 891.

Chapter 3. Life together

Having come closer to an appreciation of Bonhoeffer's monastic convictions, we turn now to an analysis of how these were implemented at Finkenwalde from 1935 to 1937. While the biographical survey above has provided the historical context, this chapter will be concerned with the details of community life, including the 'House of Brethren' and Bonhoeffer's explanation of the principles underlying it in *Life Together*.

3.1. Foundations

It should not be forgotten that these years fall squarely into that stage of Bonhoeffer's life described by Bethge as the *Discipleship phase*, a period marked by practical piety. Yet, as shown already, this phase builds on a previous *theological* foundation. There is a natural connection between the practical experiment at Finkenwalde and its earlier, more theoretical, underpinnings. Referring to Bonhoeffer's doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Clifford Green points out that

life at the Finkenwalde seminary of the Confessing Church was built upon its theology. Not only the treatment of 'community' but also the dialectic of 'the day together' and 'the day alone' and the mutual service of 'active helpfulness' and 'bearing with others' are all ideas first set out here.¹²⁹

The concepts formulated in *Sanctorum Communio* were seminal (see Barth's comment, page 13) and informed the remainder of Bonhoeffer's speech and actions. In chapter II, we noted Bonhoeffer's early determination to accept the 'concrete world as fully as possible' and the enduring challenge, articulated in his dissertation, of the 'concreteness of revelation'.

Geffrey Kelly confirms this basic continuity:

He was guided then, as he was later in the community of Finkenwalde, by the questions of how God in Christ becomes present in and among those who profess faith in the gospel – and how in turn faith, and communities of faith, must assume concrete form in the world.¹³⁰

The sub-title of *Sanctorum Communio* is: *A theological study in the sociology of the church*. Bonhoeffer's intention was to construct a theology of 'sociality', a complex category that must define the word 'church' – a term that has its own linguistic translation issues from the German into English. There is, for example, no English equivalent to the German word

¹²⁹ Green, C.J. 1998. 'Editor's introduction to the English edition' in *Sanctorum Communio: a theological study of the sociology of the church*. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 1) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 6.

¹³⁰ Kelly, *Editor's introduction to the English edition*, 6.

Volkskirche: church-of-the-people.¹³¹ Here, Green describes the theologically-critical difference between the words for ‘church’ and ‘community’:

When Bonhoeffer says, ‘the church [*Kirche*] is Christ existing as *Gemeinde*,’ this does not mean that an institution calling itself church defines where Christ is communally present. On the contrary, it is not a church organisation that defines Christ, but Christ who defines the church. In other words, it is precisely where, and only where, ‘Christ-exists-as-*Gemeinde*’ that we find the ‘church’ (*Kirche*). This point is crucial for understanding Bonhoeffer’s action in the Church Struggle against National Socialism. That there was a German church organisation, with its clergy, its traditions, its congregations, its laws – yes, even its scripture and its appeals to Martin Luther – does not guarantee that it is ‘church’. Only Christ present in communal word and sacrament, that is, the *Gemeinde Christi*, constitutes the church.¹³²

‘Appeals to Luther,’ indeed. Overshadowing Bonhoeffer’s semantics and social-philosophical theory – his entire theological framework, in fact¹³³ – is the reformed shadow of Martin Luther, interpreted at Berlin University by the historian Karl Holl, who had a parochial view of German culture and community in the Lutheran tradition. It is perhaps difficult for us in the 21st century to comprehend this sense of moral superiority – according to the ‘orders of creation’ – being taught a century ago in Germany at the tertiary level. (Then again, in South Africa, such an ideology should not be too astonishing.) It is against this distortion of Luther’s theology that Bonhoeffer had to contend. But these efforts were not merely intellectual gymnastics; there was a real desire to see the truths of Christ-existing-as-community concretely implemented.

We see in both the Berlin dissertations and in *Life Together* the traces of Bonhoeffer’s inner longing for a community life in which his call to the ministry and his love for God’s Word would merge to bring a more meaningful sense of direction into his life. What Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* on the nature of community, the dialectic of Christians’ being together yet needing time to be alone, their service, their prayer life, and their practice of confession and the Lord’s Supper, presupposes the Christo-ecclesiological groundwork of *Sanctorum Communio*.¹³⁴

To view Finkenwalde in isolation to his early writings would be to miss the point: ‘it provided a unique occasion to test out in concrete experience his understanding of what a church could and should be.’¹³⁵

¹³¹ Green, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 18. Cf. the German word ‘Volkswagen’.

¹³² *ibid.*, 14f.

¹³³ Kelly, G.B. and Godsey, J.D. 2001. ‘Editor’s introduction to the English edition’ in *Discipleship*. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 4) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 7.

¹³⁴ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 7.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, 8.

3.2. Experiments

The ‘Bonhoeffer circle’ of 1932 (see chapter II B) provided the new university lecturer with his first real opportunity to experiment. We have mentioned the excursions to Prebelow and Biesenthal. ‘Though these beginnings in community life were informal and spontaneous, they provided the earliest sparks for the creation of the kind of community life that Bonhoeffer felt might be able to reanimate the entire church.’¹³⁶

Bonhoeffer realised, however, that there was a qualitative difference between the emotional ‘high’ of a weekend retreat and the gravitas of more permanent forms of fellowship. In *Life Together*, where he discusses the distinction between *spiritual* and *human* love as a motivating force, one wonders if he had Biesenthal in mind:

as experience has shown, it is precisely in retreats of short duration that the human element develops most easily. Nothing is easier than to stimulate the glow of fellowship in a few days of life together, but nothing is more fatal to the sound, sober brotherly fellowship of everyday life ... such experiences can be no more than a gracious extra beyond the daily bread of Christian community life. We have no claim on such experiences, and we do not live with other Christians for the sake of acquiring them.¹³⁷

By the end of 1932, maintains Kelly, ‘most of the conceptual underpinnings of the community life he would depict in *Life Together* were already in place.’¹³⁸ Indeed, it is possible that plans for a concrete community were in place even then: Bonhoeffer ‘had the idea of a compact, committed community from the time he began to think about discipleship.’¹³⁹ Certainly that was the case by the following year.

Communal life at the pastoral seminary ... had been planned by Bonhoeffer for some time, even before the Confessing Church ever founded these institutions. Already in the summer of 1933 he made plans for a settlement of students. He did this by drawing on experiences of the German Youth movements, asking one of its leaders, Wilhelm Stählin, for advice.¹⁴⁰

As we have seen, the Stählin correspondence foundered on the question of political involvement – nevertheless, it shows that communitarian ideas were not alien at the time.

Ironically, Stählin was a supporter of the ‘orders of creation’ theology mentioned above – a

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 39.

¹³⁸ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 10.

¹³⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 461.

¹⁴⁰ Pfeiffer, H. ‘An aesthetic voyage: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s gradual approach towards full reality and Eberhard Bethge’s contribution to it’ in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 127 (March 2007), 68.

position that Bonhoeffer showed to be highly political: that is, one ‘which provided a justification of war between the nations.’¹⁴¹

Frustrated by the Confessing church’s dillydallying over policy decisions, Bonhoeffer took leave of his students in 1933 and moved to London – but the question regarding community never left his mind. Perhaps it was the confluence of these dual notions, resistance and community, that stimulated his desire to visit Mohandas Gandhi in India.

It is helpful at this point to note Bonhoeffer’s perception of the state of the church struggle. Describing his own efforts to his friend Sutz in 1934, he foresaw that

*this opposition is only a very temporary transition to an opposition of a very different kind, and that very few of those engaged in this preliminary skirmish will be part of the next struggle ... Simply suffering – that is what will be needed then – not parries, blows or thrusts such as may still be possible or admissible in the preliminary fight; the real struggle that perhaps lies ahead must simply be to suffer faithfully.*¹⁴²

Here, at this stage, Bethge does not discern the shape of a new political ethic. ‘Discipleship – not political resistance – was what lent seriousness and depth to the initial skirmish with its ‘blows and thrusts.’¹⁴³ Nevertheless, we have tabulated below what Bonhoeffer may have had in mind. It appears that he was seriously contemplating an encounter with the pioneer of *satyagraha* (resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience) founded on *ahimsa* (total non-violence), a successful rebellion that led to the independence of India. The juxtaposition of these methods of resistance together with the phases of Bonhoeffer’s life is interesting.

	<i>Stage 1</i>	<i>Stage 2</i>
state of struggle	‘preliminary skirmish’	‘opposition of a different kind’
characteristic	‘parries, blows, thrusts’	‘simply suffering’ / Gandhi?
Bethge’s description	discipleship	new political ethic?
Bonhoeffer’s identity	‘Christian’	‘Man for his times’

It is not difficult to superimpose *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* onto (community) ‘suffering’. Accordingly, a letter was written to Gandhi expressing Bonhoeffer’s wish ‘to study

¹⁴¹ Clements, K. 1999. ‘Ecumenical witness for peace’ in *The Cambridge companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 164.

¹⁴² Extract from Bonhoeffer’s letter to E. Sutz, dated 28 April 1934. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 326.

¹⁴³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 327.

community life as well as methods of training’¹⁴⁴ and an invitation duly arrived: ‘With reference to your desire to share my daily life, I may say that you will be staying with me if I am out of prison and settled in one place when you come.’¹⁴⁵ As already mentioned, the dilemma was real: which invitation to accept?

Bonhoeffer was motivated by the desire to witness Gandhi’s exemplification of the Sermon on the Mount – in the spiritual exercises aimed toward a certain goal, and the Indian ways of resistance against tyrannical. At that point it was still unthinkable to Bonhoeffer to join a conspiracy against Hitler; he sought a prototype for passive resistance that could induce changes without violence ... While he supported the church struggle with all his might, at a deeper level he was looking for a different form of commitment that would be legitimate.¹⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer had hoped that the Indian experience might better prepare him for the seminary, but discovered that the time necessary for this visit no longer existed. Therefore, ‘faced with a clear alternative, he chose Pomerania, where he would have to form his own *ashram* – the seminary.’¹⁴⁷

It is interesting to speculate whether a Bonhoeffer-Gandhi encounter would have changed anything. As it is, we know that the European theologian substituted for the India visit a whirlwind tour of several Anglican monasteries in the early part of 1935, desiring to ‘study firsthand the ‘monastic’ training in vogue in other traditions ... Bonhoeffer made the rounds of these communities and others as well, including the seminaries of Presbyterians and Congregationalists, plus the Methodist College in Richmond.’¹⁴⁸ At these institutions,

he noted the way in which a candidate’s personal life during the period of study was influenced by the church in general and by his home parish, for example, among Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or Baptists. He often spoke of the impression the Methodist college in Richmond had made on him ... In the entrance hall there were boards with long lists of names, each followed by the date of ordination and the date of death, often in the same year: for decades the candidates from the college had rapidly succeeded one another in the fatal climate of the mission posts.¹⁴⁹

He was also struck ‘by the pledge given by Baptist students before entering seminary, in which they affirmed their intention to become a preacher and undertook to conduct

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 408.

¹⁴⁵ Bethge, E., Bethge, R. and Gremmels, C., eds. 1986. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: a life in pictures*. Translated by John Bowden. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 137.

¹⁴⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 409.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 13.

¹⁴⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 412.

themselves accordingly.’¹⁵⁰ In preparing to return to Germany, Kelly believes Bonhoeffer consolidated a variety of goals that he had set himself since his 1931 visit to America:

- to deepen the theology on the Mount
- to form a Christian community based on commitment to the gospel
- to live in a community committed to peace, given to prayer at regular intervals, and dedicated to service of those in need.¹⁵¹

In the few years that passed since his United States visit, communitarian ideas had taken centre-stage and Bonhoeffer was willing to go beyond the boundaries of his own tradition in order to appropriate them. From Anglican monasteries to Hindu ashrams, there appears to be no doubt that communality was key to the kind of church ‘restoration’ he had in mind.

3.3. Finkenwalde

Temporarily lodged at the Rhineland Bible School in Zingst, twenty-three candidates arrived at their more permanent abode in late June 1935, a former country estate house in the town of Finkenwalde (now *Szczecin-Zdroje*) to the southeast of Stettin city (now *Szczecin* in northwest Poland). That summer was, Bonhoeffer recalled, the ‘fullest’ time of his life.

Logistical concerns were the immediate priority. With the help of family, friends and neighbours, the main house was furnished, the gymnasium converted into a chapel, and Bonhoeffer’s books imported from Berlin for library use. A daily regimen, both spiritual and physical, was established. Described succinctly in *Life Together*, the day was spent ‘in a balance of piety, study, classes in theology and preaching, services of all sorts to one another, meals together, worship, leisure, and play.’¹⁵² For our purposes, we will concentrate chiefly on the spiritual regimen and Bonhoeffer’s contribution in terms of *Discipleship*.

3.3.1. Discipleship

We have seen how Bethge described the present *Christian* phase of Bonhoeffer’s life in terms of ‘discipleship’ (chapter II B). Central to this phase was the production of *Nachfolge*, a book based largely on two series of lectures that distinguished the syllabus at Finkenwalde from those of other preachers’ seminaries. While the usual subjects of ‘homiletics’, ‘ministry and church’, and ‘confessional writings’ were

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 429.

¹⁵¹ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 13.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, 14.

assiduously taught, the students soon realised that the lectures on ‘discipleship’ were qualitatively different. When Bonhoeffer declared that summer to be the ‘fullest time of his life’, it was because he was able at last to work on his favourite topic.

The lectures began in Zingst, before the move to Finkenwalde, with the book’s second chapter, ‘The call to discipleship’. Defining discipleship as commitment to Christ, Bonhoeffer set the tone for the series with the formulation: ‘only the believer is obedient – only the obedient believe’. The third chapter, ‘Simple obedience’ was only written after the first lecture series, yet ‘Discipleship and the cross’ (chapter 4) was there at the start. ‘The sermon on the mount’ followed ‘Discipleship and the individual’, as in the book, but as Bethge points out:

Bonhoeffer did not appear at the preachers’ seminary with a manuscript ready for publication ... entire sections of his lectures went straight into the book. He continued to make alterations and deletions and to insert whole new chapters until the last page of the manuscript was delivered.¹⁵³

The book’s second part derived from further lectures at Finkenwalde from the winter of 1935 to the summer of 1937, shortly before the seminary was closed down. An announcement in the last regular newsletter to the brothers, dated 26 August 1937, read: ‘And now for some good news. Despite all our many other activities, the book we have been waiting for has now been completed and is being typed up.’¹⁵⁴ *Nachfolge* appeared at the end of that year.

What Bonhoeffer was aiming at in *Discipleship* is nothing less than a concrete understanding of ‘faith’ – what, in other words, does it mean to follow Christ? It is only grace, *costly* grace, that allows us to follow. Over the centuries, such grace had gradually been lost by the church – except, initially, in monasticism.

Here, on the boundary of the church, was the place where the awareness that grace is costly and that grace includes discipleship was preserved. People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus’ strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularisation of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 451.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. 2001. *Discipleship*. DBWE 4. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 4) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 46f.

Bonhoeffer's comment here – monasticism as 'protest against secularisation' – is indicative of the magnitude of the personal change that was to come. Looking back, he saw true faith as *against* the world (protest). Looking forward, we see Bonhoeffer's faith as *for* the world (embrace).

Paradoxically, because the church put up with this dissent, the monastic protest was relativised to the point where it became a society of the spiritually elite. The

decisive mistake of monasticism was not that it followed the grace-laden path of strict discipleship ... the mistake was that monasticism essentially distanced itself from what is Christian by permitting its way to become the extraordinary achievement of a few.¹⁵⁶

Martin Luther's rediscovery of costly grace took him via the monastery. As a monk, he renounced all he had and learned obedience 'because he knew that only those who are obedient can believe.' Yet it was in the monastery he realised that discipleship is not about individual accomplishment but God's command.

Luther saw the monk's escape from the world as really a subtle love for the world. In this shattering of his last possibility to achieve a pious life, grace seized Luther ... Luther had to leave the monastery and re-enter the world, not because the world itself was good and holy, but because even the monastery was nothing else but world.¹⁵⁷

To follow Jesus now meant obedience for every believer, not in seclusion but in the world. The grace required is not cheap; this much is clear from Bonhoeffer's exposition of the Sermon on the mount. 'Disciples live with not only renouncing their own rights, but even *renouncing their own righteousness*. They got no credit themselves for what they do and sacrifice. The only righteousness they can have is in hungering and thirsting for it.'¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, obedience in the form of service to God necessarily means service to brother and sister. Since God refused to separate himself from Christ, who assumed human form and equality, he will not separate himself from humanity. Thus, 'service to God in worship can no longer be detached from service to sisters and brothers.'¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 48.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 106.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 124.

Obedience in the world does not mean the lapse of spiritual discipline, as Jesus' assumption that his disciples fasted would indicate. When my 'flesh' (my selfish will) is 'chastised' I feel my separation from the world.

A life which remains without any ascetic discipline, which indulges in all the desires of the flesh as long as they are permitted by the [civil order], will find it difficult to enter the service of Christ. Satiated flesh is unwilling to pray and is unfit for self-sacrificing service.¹⁶⁰

Interestingly, Kelly and Godsey point out that Bonhoeffer's advocacy of spiritual disciplines was not new. The first record of it dates back to his year in Barcelona (1928), when he 'recommended to his congregation that they try to spend at least ten minutes each day in silent meditation.'¹⁶¹ Here, Bonhoeffer talks about the point of such discipline: 'the flesh must learn to understand that it has no rights of its own':

Christians will have to attack the resistance of their flesh whenever they recognise that they have failed in their service, that their willingness has weakened, that they have become guilty influencing the lives of others or causing the guilt of others, that their joy in God is fading, that their strength for prayer is no longer present. Christians who recognise that will try to get ready for better service through spiritual exercises, fasting, and prayer.¹⁶²

Though the dangers of asceticism remain multiple (and Bonhoeffer spells them out), disciples 'should remain humble in the voluntary exercises of humility ... they should never burden others with such exercises, using them as a reproach or a law.'¹⁶³

To those who ask 'Where can we hear the call to discipleship?', there is no special revelation. If Jesus is present in the preaching and sacrament of the church, we must listen to the preaching and receive the sacrament; 'Listen to the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord!'¹⁶⁴ Disciples can have no community with Christ except through community with his body: the body of Jesus Christ 'is identical with the new humanity which he has assumed.'¹⁶⁵ It is in this visible, church-community that God's Word finds the space for proclamation:

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, footnote 190.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, 159f.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 160f.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 202.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 217.

The Word of God seeks out community in order to accept it. It exists mainly within the community. It moves on its own into the community. It has an inherent impulse toward community ... The preacher should and can do nothing more than be a servant of this movement inherent in the Word itself, and refrain from placing obstacles in its path.¹⁶⁶

Luther's return to the world, then,

was meant as a protest and criticism of the secularisation of Christianity within the monastic life. By calling Christians back into the world, Luther in fact calls them to become unworldly in the true sense ... Luther's call to return into the world always was a call to become a part of the visible church-community of the incarnate Lord.¹⁶⁷

The church-community – in the world but not of it – is *unworldly*, 'it lives in a foreign land. It is a colony of strangers far away from home, a community of foreigners enjoying the hospitality of the host country in which they live, obeying its laws, and honouring its authorities.'¹⁶⁸ Here again is the 'alien' theme taken up by Hauerwas, which we will later discuss.

The success of Bonhoeffer's book was initially difficult to gauge, though he got an early indication in 1940 during his stay at the Ettal monastery when he found the monks reading aloud from both *Discipleship* and *Life Together* over Christmas. It was two decades later, in his *Church Dogmatics*, that Karl Barth commented:

Easily the best that has been written on this subject is to be found in *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer ... the matter is handled with such depth and precision that I am almost tempted simply to reproduce them in an extended quotation.¹⁶⁹

Ernst Feil believes that at the time of the book's writing, Bonhoeffer's thinking was characterised by both a christological concentration and a 'negative' relationship of the Christian to the world – a sign of its author's attraction to a genuine monastic life.¹⁷⁰ If Feil's analysis is correct, it explains why Bonhoeffer's interest in monasticism did not remain theoretical but was soon put into practice.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 227f.

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 245.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 250.

¹⁶⁹ Barth, K. 1960. *Church dogmatics* Vol. IV/2, 533. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 454.

¹⁷⁰ Feil, E. 1985. *The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Translated by H. Martin Rumscheidt. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 128f. Quoted in Kuske, M. and Tödt, I. 2001. 'Editor's afterword to the German edition' in *Discipleship*. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 4) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 313.

3.3.2. Discipline

The ‘communal meditation’ mentioned above (chapter II B) as a concession was actually the outcome of corporate frustration experienced by the community who initially struggled to adapt to this discipline.

For the seminarians, following Christ ‘Bonhoeffer’s way’ meant beginning each day with a period of meditation for which they were ill prepared. Some read, some slept, some smoked their pipes, some let their minds wander. Some voiced their resentment over being the butt of jokes from other preachers’ seminaries about their ‘unevangelical monasticism.’¹⁷¹

The fact that Bonhoeffer was sometimes away from Finkenwalde on church business did not help this tense situation. Nevertheless, instead of suspending the practice or ignoring the students’ complaints, he listened to their grievances and proposed a communal meditation one day a week. The discipline of daily meditation continued and, as we have seen, proved its usefulness in acute circumstances. ‘It brought home to them that their faith was in God’s Word as a word given to them – not just something they doled out to others in their preaching.’¹⁷²

In *Life Together*, we read about the value of the *Losungen* – brief daily texts drawn from the Scriptures. (These were the texts later sent in newsletters to all Finkenwaldians.) Unlike the longer passages chosen for communal devotions,

in our personal meditation we confine ourselves to a brief selected text, which possibly may not be changed for a whole week. If in our reading of the Scriptures together we are led into the whole length and breadth of the Bible, here we go into the unfathomable depths of a particular sentence and word.¹⁷³

This was no impersonal advice; Bonhoeffer led by example. He advocated the practice of meditation because he was intimate with its benefits. In answer to the question ‘Why do I meditate?’, Bethge included the following salient points for Finkenwalde’s May 1936 newsletter, written under Bonhoeffer’s supervision:

- because I am a Christian and because therefore every day on which I do not penetrate more deeply into the knowledge of the Word of God in Holy Scripture is wasted.

¹⁷¹ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 14.

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 81f.

- because I am a preacher of the Word. I cannot expound Scripture unless I let it speak to me every day.
- because I need a firm discipline of prayer.
- because I need help against the unseemly haste and disquiet that also endangers my work as pastor.¹⁷⁴

Six years later, in a letter dated 1 March 1942, Bonhoeffer referred to the discipline as a ‘precious gift’:

Daily, quiet attention to the Word of God which is meant for me, even if it is only for a few minutes, will become for me the focal point of everything which brings inward and outward order into my life. In the interruption and fragmentation of our previous ordered life, in the danger of losing inner discipline ..., meditation gives our life something like constancy. It maintains the link with our previous life, from baptism to confirmation, to ordination. It keeps us in the saving community of our congregation, of our brothers and sisters, of our spiritual home.¹⁷⁵

That Bonhoeffer could write this in personal circumstances much changed, as *Man for his times*, underlines the enduring importance that he placed in meditation. His attitude to prayer was no less steadfast, though he brought fresh insight to the practice of prayer. In a section of *Life Together* entitled ‘The secret of the Psalter’, for example, Bonhoeffer maintains that

The *Man* Jesus Christ, to whom no affliction, no ill, no suffering is alien and who yet was the wholly innocent and righteous one, is praying in the Psalter through the mouth of his Church. The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word. He prayed the Psalter and now it has become his prayer book for all time.¹⁷⁶

It is not difficult to detect in these words the convictions of *Sanctorum Communio*¹⁷⁷, of Christ existing (praying!) in his own community. Müller and Schönherr call this the *Christological mediation of prayer* in which, since only Christ is our way to God, he is also ‘the unity of the Word of God to us and our answer in prayer to God. He

¹⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The way to freedom*, 57f.

¹⁷⁵ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 46.

¹⁷⁷ For an analysis of how Bonhoeffer realises *Sanctorum Communio* in *Life Together*, see Himes, B. 2008. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s church-community: Sanctorum Communio in the midst of Life Together*. Unpublished paper presented at the Pacific Northwest Regional American Academy of Religion meeting in Tacoma, Washington on 25 April 2009.

himself prays the Psalter in the humanity he has assumed ... At its core, then, prayer is a praying along with Jesus.’¹⁷⁸

As noted previously, of all the spiritual disciplines Bonhoeffer tried to implement, it was that of ‘personal confession’ that caused the most controversy. Even before the move to Finkenwalde, he suggested that seminarians should confess their sins either to himself or each other prior to celebrating the Lord’s Supper. The response was one of surprise and, possibly, resentment: how could Protestants submit to a ‘Catholic’ practice like this?

As the discipline became more familiar though the summer, however, Bethge records that the atmosphere changed for the better – without becoming inquisitorial. Again, Bonhoeffer set an example by asking one of the ‘unqualified’ students to hear his confession. Taking the insight from *Sanctorum Communio* that in Christ’s place our brother or sister stands, Bonhoeffer writes

Before him I need no longer to dissemble. Before him alone in the whole world I dare to be the sinner that I am; here the truth of Jesus Christ and his mercy rules. Christ became our Brother in order to help us. Through him our brother has become Christ for us in the power and authority of the commission Christ has given to him.¹⁷⁹

The commission is, of course, John 20:23 – ‘If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld’ (ESV). As a young student, during his 1924 visit to Rome, Bonhoeffer had been impressed with the human ‘need’ to confess. At the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, with ‘all the confessionals occupied and surrounded by worshippers’, he noticed that

even the children confess with a real ardour that is very moving to see. To many of these people confession is not a ‘must’ but has become a need ... for primitive people it is the only way to talk to God, while to the religiously more farsighted it is the realisation of the idea of the church fulfilling itself in confession and absolution.¹⁸⁰

Coming the year before his work on *Sanctorum Communio*, it is interesting to observe how Bonhoeffer’s view of confession developed from this root to its

¹⁷⁸ Müller, G.L. and Schönherr, A. 1996. ‘Editor’s afterword to the German edition’ in *Life together; The prayerbook of the Bible: an introduction to the Psalms*. (English translation of the German critical edition *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol. 5) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 180.

¹⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 111.

¹⁸⁰ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 60.

application at Finkenwalde as precisely a way of ‘talking to God’. In the act of confession he saw the concreteness of the Gospel.

Another marker of this development is glimpsed in 1936 when he wrote a second Lutheran catechism, in which ‘oral confession, entirely unmentioned in [his 1931 catechism], was given more space than the passages on baptism and the sacrament together.’¹⁸¹ It was written in response to an appeal from his Finkenwalde students – ‘what are we to say, at a time like this, about the issue of public confession?’ – and presented at one of their retreats. In retrospect, Bethge felt that irrespective of its didactic value, ‘the 1936 catechism is interesting because it summarises what Bonhoeffer viewed at the time as the absolute minimum of what the congregation’s message should be.’¹⁸²

Confession, Bonhoeffer believed, is integral to community. In ‘Confession and Communion’, the last chapter of *Life Together*, the act of confession is described as a ‘break-through’ to community. In contrast to the power of sin, which claims the individual for itself, in confession the gospel breaks into the reclusive heart and exposes private sin to the light.

Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother.¹⁸³

The consequences of this act for the community are multiple:

- the individual is no longer alone with his sin, having cast it off in confession
- revealed and judged as sin, acknowledged sin can no longer tear the fellowship apart
- the fellowship now bears the sin of the brother
- the individual now stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, 189. The 1931 catechism was published by Bonhoeffer and Franz Hildebrandt in *Monatsschrift für Pastoraltheologie*, nos. 5/6 (1932), col. 167-72.

¹⁸² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 189.

¹⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 112.

Confession thus leads directly to genuine community. ‘The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him to find true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ.’¹⁸⁴ This insight is taken by Hauerwas and Willimon to be one that characterises the colony (church-community): ‘If we get good enough at forgiving the strangers who gather around the Lord’s Table, we hope that we shall be good at forgiving the strangers who gather with us around the breakfast table.’¹⁸⁵

Since, in Christ, I meet the whole congregation in the one to whom I confess, it is unnecessary to confess publicly before many people. When I find fellowship with my confessor, I find fellowship with the entire community. Bonhoeffer can conclude, therefore, that ‘if a Christian is in the fellowship of confession with a brother he will never be alone again, anywhere.’¹⁸⁶ Two caveats apply to the confessing community, however: a) confessors should themselves practise confession, and b) confessants should never see this act as something pious or in any way ‘super-spiritual’ – the courage to confess is based squarely on the grace and forgiveness of God.

Taken together with Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the confessor taking the position of Christ, we may observe here a distinctly Catholic approach to spirituality based on a rigorous theology. Bonhoeffer’s ingenuity lay in his integration of monastic disciplines into a theology of discipleship which formed the heart of his curriculum at Finkenwalde.

3.4. The ‘House of Brothers’

On 6 September 1935, in a letter addressed to the church council of the Old Prussian Union, Bonhoeffer requested permission for some of the ordinands from his first seminary course to remain behind at Finkenwalde in order to assist him with the next intake of students. The proposal was met with initial resistance, not least because the parishes urgently needed young theologians at the time.

Nevertheless, six candidates were granted permission to stay. Of these, four formed the core of the community house – Eberhard Bethge, Joachim Kanitz, Winfried Maechler, Albrecht Schönherr – and, having survived the war, contributed significantly to the Bonhoeffer legacy (we refer to the writings of both Bethge and Schönherr in this paper). To a large extent,

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 113.

¹⁸⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 91.

¹⁸⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 113.

these brothers adhered to the daily seminary regimen – though, while the seminarians had singing practice at noon, they met together for discussion and prayer in Bonhoeffer’s room.

3.4.1. Proposal

Influenced, no doubt, by the monastic communities at Mirfield and Kelham, Bonhoeffer’s very concrete idea was to form a community house based on the practice of spiritual disciplines. The reasons supporting Bonhoeffer’s proposal have already been referred to above (chapter II B), but it is worthwhile examining them here in more detail:

3.4.1.1. preaching

The pastor, and particularly the young pastor, suffers from being by himself. The burden of preaching is particularly heavy today for the solitary pastor who is not a prophet, but just a servant of the church. He needs brotherly help and fellowship not only to show him what to preach, but also to show him how to preach it.¹⁸⁷

To this end, Bonhoeffer appealed to certain initiatives that had already occurred the previous year within the Confessing church, ‘new fellowships of young pastors who wanted to stay within the church and develop new forms of ministry that would be ecclesiastically legitimate.’¹⁸⁸ Locating his proposal in this recent flowering of Lutheran ministers’ fraternals, Bonhoeffer thus pre-empted the accusation that he was acting unilaterally.

3.4.1.2. Christian life

The nature of the Christian life is again being questioned by the younger generation of theologians ... [the answer to their questions] can only be given through a concrete, down-to-earth life together; and a common regard for the commandments.¹⁸⁹

We have noted Bonhoeffer’s aversion to the abstract and his preference for the concrete. This inclination pertained most definitely, he believed, to the way in which Christians live. Particularly in the pastorate, the time had come for ‘new practical ventures’ in practising what we preach.

¹⁸⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The way to freedom*, 29f.

¹⁸⁸ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 461.

¹⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *The way to freedom*, 30.

3.4.1.3. service

There is a need for a group of completely free, trained pastors to preach the Word of God for decision and for discerning the spirits, in the present church struggle and in others to come, and to be immediately ready to serve as preachers at the outbreak of any new emergency.¹⁹⁰

This may necessitate, insisted Bonhoeffer, the renunciation of all clerical privileges if the pastors were to serve unconditionally at a moment's notice – though ideally from a communal base that would supply both a home as well as their fellowship.

3.4.1.4. retreat

The pastor who exercises his office alone is in constant need of a spiritual haven in which he can strengthen himself for his office in a strict Christian way of life, of prayer, meditation, study of Scripture and brotherly discussion.¹⁹¹

Another practical advantage for the Confessing church, it was argued, would be the community's utility as a 'retreat centre' for the use of both clergy and lay people.

The implementation of these objectives, Bonhoeffer proposed further, required a special lifestyle. In the interest of interpretation, the relevant paragraph in his letter to the church council is quoted in full:

The brethren of the community live together with a strict liturgical ordering of their day. They are guided through the day not by cultic forms, but by the word of the Bible and by prayer. They are bound together by brotherly admonition and discipline and by open confession. A common theological and ecclesiastical consideration of preaching and the Word of God in the Bible will keep them down-to-earth and practical. Renouncing everything except the simple necessities, they take upon themselves to lead a common life. The director of the community will assign to each brother his particular work. Here the position is envisaged as being like that of a house of deaconesses. The brethren, living in this ordered community and being supported by it, put themselves at the service of the church, to follow any call that may come to them. The brethren agree to work for a lengthy period of time in the community, but are free to depart at any time. The community itself decides upon admission. Its size is not to be too large.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹² *ibid.*, 31f.

3.4.2. Practice

It is helpful to consider here an extract from another letter, this one written nearly a year later to Wolfgang Staemmler, in which the goals of the community house are succinctly described. At the time of writing, 27 June 1936, the House of Brethren had been in existence for ten months.

There are two things the brothers have to learn during their short time in the seminary – first, how to lead a communal life in daily and strict obedience to the will of Christ Jesus, in the exercise of the humblest and highest service one Christian can perform for another; they must learn to recognize the strength and liberation to be found in service to one another and communal life in a Christian community. This is something they are going to need.

Secondly, they have to learn to serve the truth alone in the study of the Bible and its interpretation in their sermons and teaching. I personally am responsible for this second duty, but the first I cannot shoulder by myself. For this there must be a core group of brothers who, without fuss, involve the others in their communal life. That is what the House of Brethren is.¹⁹³

Little did the brothers know that their experiment in communal living would last just two years: Finkenwalde was closed by the Gestapo in September 1937. But, is an *experiment* not by definition a provisional phenomenon? Surely Bonhoeffer recognised this when, in introducing his proposal to the church council, he alluded to its time-frame: ‘I have formed the plan ... of setting up a Protestant community in which we shall lead attempt to lead a common Christian life as pastors, *for the space of a few years.*’¹⁹⁴

In *Life Together*, there is a chapter simply entitled ‘Ministry’. It is introduced with a reference to the power-struggle among Jesus’ disciples (Luke 9:46 – ‘There arose a reasoning among them’). Against this background of strong versus weak, gifted and ungifted persons, simple and difficult people, devout and less devout, sociable and solitary, Bonhoeffer deals with the commitment to *service* in its various forms. These ‘ministries’ are listed below in the original order:

3.4.2.1. the ministry of holding one’s tongue

‘It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him ... to speak about a brother

¹⁹³ Extract from Bonhoeffer’s letter to W. Staemmler. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 467.

¹⁹⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The way to freedom*, 29 (my italics).

covertly is forbidden, even under the cloak of help and good will.’¹⁹⁵ It is from the perspective of *freedom* from the disciples’ power struggle described above that Bonhoeffer commends this – and every other – ministry.

At Finkenwalde, this rule – when broken – was extended to include not telling the person that he had been spoken about. ‘The participants learned almost as much from the failure to observe this simple rule, and from the renewed resolution to keep it, as they did from the sermons and exegeses.’¹⁹⁶

3.4.2.2. the ministry of meekness

‘Only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think little of himself ... My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible.’¹⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer here depreciates the appeal to Paul who insisted on his Roman ‘rights’. It is a measure of the change in him during the final phase, when he was hardly against using artifice to frustrate the Nazi bureaucracy.

3.4.2.3. the ministry of listening

Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening ... We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.¹⁹⁸

Thus, the first ministry does not impinge on all speaking. Together with the next two ministries, ‘listening’ is identified as a *service to others*.

3.4.2.4. the ministry of helpfulness

‘In the monastery his vow of obedience to the abbot deprives the monk of the right to dispose of his own time. In evangelical community life, free service to one’s brother takes the place of that vow.’¹⁹⁹ For the Samaritan passing by, service meant the possibility of being ‘interrupted’ by God. Likewise, our schedules are better arranged by God than by us.

¹⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 92.

¹⁹⁶ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 428.

¹⁹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life together*, 95f.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 98f.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 100.

3.4.2.5. the ministry of bearing

‘(Gal. 6:2) the law of Christ is a law of bearing ... The brother is a burden to the Christian, precisely because he is a Christian.’²⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer understands this burden both in terms of the other person’s *freedom* and in terms of the other person’s *sin*. That person’s freedom imposes on the Christian’s personal autonomy; that person’s sin causes the rupture of fellowship – but also the possibility of forgiveness and renewed fellowship.

‘Since every sin of every member burdens and indicts the whole community, the congregation rejoices, in the midst of all the pain and the burden the brother’s sin inflicts, that it has the privilege of bearing and forgiving.’²⁰¹

3.4.2.6. the ministry of proclaiming

The service to which Bonhoeffer refers here is not the ministry of preaching, but rather ‘the free communication of the Word from person to person.’ To know that we are each one sinners *in need of help* is the basis for this communication.

Indeed, when we reprove we are according ‘the one real dignity that man has, namely, that , though he is a sinner, he can share in God’s grace and glory and be God’s child ... The practice of discipline in the congregation begins in the smallest circles.’²⁰²

3.4.2.7. the ministry of authority

Returning full circle to the disciples’ power struggle, Bonhoeffer quotes Mark 10:43 – ‘whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant’ – with this comment: ‘Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent on brotherly service. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out.’²⁰³ There is, therefore, no place for the personality cult in Christian community.

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, 103.

²⁰² *ibid.*, 106f.

²⁰³ *ibid.*, 108.

3.4.3. Perception

By now it should be evident that daily life for the seminary student at Finkenwalde was extra-ordinary. The disciplined regimen had more in common with Catholic monasticism than Lutheran (not to mention ‘Protestant’) tradition. How has this deviation, this departure from the norm, been interpreted?

The community with its ethos of discipleship was criticised as ‘escapist’ on at least two grounds: firstly, in avoiding the Confessing church struggle; secondly, in terms of Bonhoeffer’s later, more ‘mature’ worldly theology. Neither were jibes that the seminary director was running a Catholic monastery infrequent.

Far from ducking the issue of political activism, Bonhoeffer put the struggle into context: the disciple is really engaged in a battle with powers and principalities, with *Empire*. Instead of spiritualising the conflict,

he offered instead the revolutionary values of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount and his prophetic teachings against calamitous political systems and reductionist religious practices that masqueraded as the easily measured, tension-free path to salvation.²⁰⁴

Regarding his prison theology, it is true that *Discipleship* was written for Christians and that Bonhoeffer admitted there were some ‘dangers’ therein²⁰⁵. Earnest efforts by nonreligious²⁰⁶ people to resist Empire (Hitler’s administration) affected Bonhoeffer deeply, and doubtless prompted the transition to ‘Man for his times’. Nevertheless, his book says much about God’s suffering and ‘weakness’ in the cross, a recurring theme of the prison letters. It enquires, further, about the secular vocation: how may one ‘have faith’ as a person working in the world?²⁰⁷

Discipleship is therefore hardly a ‘detour’, but a pivotal text that showed how Bonhoeffer could move all the way from podium to prison.²⁰⁸ This movement was no hop-skip-and-jump, but a sequence of deliberately considered steps. One can see this in his changing attitude to pacifism. In an early confirmation catechesis,

²⁰⁴ Kelly and Godsey, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 20.

²⁰⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. 1953. *Letters and papers from prison*. London: SCM Press, 125.

²⁰⁶ During his years in the Resistance, Bonhoeffer was struck by the ethically responsible work of essentially secular people – including his own brother and brothers-in-law. Not religious, they were nevertheless ‘risking their lives for the sake of humanity, peace and future generations.’ Green, *Human sociality and Christian community*, 129.

²⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 245.

²⁰⁸ Kelly and Godsey, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 21.

Bonhoeffer has one of the pupils make the statement: ‘Matt. 5:39ff. seems to say that accepting the commandment to love our neighbour implies refraining from all resistance against evil.’ In the mouth of the teacher he puts the sentence: ‘Love’s intention is to overcome evil ... Where has the commandment of the Sermon on the Mount reached its limit?’ And the pupil answers: ‘It has reached its limit wherever its fulfilment does not overcome but instead strengthens evil.’²⁰⁹

In one of the plainest statements about his own ‘conversion’ – and consequent transition to the *Discipleship* phase – Bonhoeffer refers to the role of the Sermon on the Mount:

I know that at that time I turned the doctrine of Jesus Christ into something of personal advantage for myself ... I had never prayed, or prayed only very little. For all my loneliness, I was quite pleased with myself. Then the Bible, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount, freed me from that. Since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people about me. It was a great liberation. It became clear to me that the life of a servant of Jesus Christ must belong to the church, and step by step it became clearer to me how far that must go.²¹⁰

Later, in a final transition, Bonhoeffer came full circle. All along the way, however, he found that the steps of discipleship are liberating moments when they lead to the cross. Indeed, ‘each step marks a new entrance into discipleship’.²¹¹

Recalling again that Finkenwalde was not a monastery but a seminary, we must acknowledge that, without paying much attention to external censure, Bonhoeffer succeeded in establishing a cohesive structure for seminary training, one that provided ordinands with the necessary tools for effective Christian ministry. Regarding the benefit of Bonhoeffer’s monastic style for his students, Kelly has suggested the following:

- they experienced, many for the first time, the ‘sustaining power for their ministry of life in a faith-filled, caring community’
- rigorous theological training helped them distinguish ‘between the task of theology and the mission of pastoral care’
- their daily routine was creatively interrupted, often by Bonhoeffer himself

²⁰⁹ Kuske and Tödt, *Editor’s afterword to the German edition*, 289.

²¹⁰ Extract from Bonhoeffer’s letter to unknown recipient, dated 27 January 1936. Quoted in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 205.

²¹¹ Kuske and Tödt, *Editor’s afterword to the German edition*, 309.

- as Bonhoeffer made plain, the point of their life together was not monastic seclusion but concentration for service outside.²¹²

The *Bruderhaus* was, in a sense, ‘icing on the cake’ for Bonhoeffer. Both in his proposal for its inception and in his description of its lifestyle following its demise, there is an undeniable passion for all that the House stood for. If only from a didactic perspective, the authority given to instruction by a core community living out the content of that teaching is immeasurable.

3.5. Conclusion

It is clear that, torn as he often was between the poles defining his theology, Bonhoeffer was able to act swiftly and move directly to implement what he saw as crucial to the achievement of his goals, including the overarching aim of church restoration. Defying convention to do so, whether in communality or spirituality, bears testimony to both his vision and self-confidence.

At a World Council of Churches conference marking Bonhoeffer’s 70th birthday in 1976, Carl von Weizsäcker reflected on the legacy of the book *Discipleship*:

Bonhoeffer had been entrusted with a group of pastoral candidates nearly his own age with whom he lived together in a communal setting. He had the courage to offer to them, and even impose on them, some of the ancient rules of monastic life which in every age have proven helpful to those engaged in a serious effort to live that life. Among these rules were a set pattern for each day, a prayer liturgy, and a humble rediscovery of some practices in the infinitely rich field of meditation. The fact that Bonhoeffer introduced these rules and practices in the face of firmly set Protestant prejudices against them exemplifies, in my judgement, the very same ‘courage to be real’ which, in the final phase of his theological development, led him in the apparently opposite direction of embracing a sense of ‘worldliness.’ His own life became a living example of Bonhoeffer’s conviction that the Christian life can become more worldly only by becoming more spiritual, and more spiritual only by becoming more worldly.²¹³

It is this pendular dialectic, so characteristic in the thought and life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, between world and monastery, between public service and private spirituality, which has so profoundly shaped the New Monasticism.

²¹² Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 20.

²¹³ Von Weizsäcker, C.F. 1976. ‘Thoughts of a non-theologian on the theological development of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’ in *The ambivalence of progress*. New York: Paragon, 166. Quoted in Kuske and Tödt, *Editor’s afterword to the German edition*, 313.

Chapter 4. The new monasticism

In our Introduction we noted that, while any recent development within the monastic tradition can technically be described as a ‘new’ monasticism, it is in the term’s modern sense that it is used: that is, contemporary intentional communities drawing on classic monastic tradition. Also in the same chapter, we attempted to discern some distinguishing features of ‘intentional community’: namely, that it is residential, is planned, and exhibits some kind of common vision or shared goal. Perhaps more than any other core value, it is the community-which-is-intentional that the new monasticism shares with the old.

In the sections that follow, it will become increasingly apparent in what ways the new differs from the old. Rather than attempting to locate the contemporary movement within the stream of historic intentional community, however, we will pay attention to three twentieth-century ecumenical communities that signal both continuity and discontinuity with classical monasticism. Since Finkenwalde is revisited later (chapters V and VI), it will not be considered in this chapter except in comparison with the ecumenical communities. Nevertheless, many of the discussions that follow find an echo in Bonhoeffer’s legacy: both in his theology and his discipleship. The ‘twelve marks’ that define new monasticism will then be considered.

4.1. Protestant antecedents

Since the time of Luther, Protestantism has been noted for its repudiation of classical monasticism. Yet, in the centuries following the Reformation, the impulse towards intentional community – and even *monastic* community – has not infrequently been evident in various ecclesial movements. The Anabaptists, for example, endeavoured fully

to live up to the ethical demands of the Sermon on the Mount. The Catholic way of striving for Christian perfection was that of the monastery, communities of celibates apart from the world. The Anabaptists were akin to monks in seeking perfection in communities separate from the world, but, unlike the monks, they married.²¹⁴

Though Anabaptist theology was occasional in nature, their view of the church as ‘a visible fellowship of obedient disciples, exhibiting the way of suffering love’²¹⁵ was markedly different from that of the Reformers. Anabaptists saw the church variously ‘as congregation, as inner spiritual reality, as intentional community and as kingdom of God. However, at the

²¹⁴ Latourette, K.S. 1953. *A history of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 779.

²¹⁵ Loewen, H.J.L. 1988. ‘Anabaptist theology’ in *New dictionary of theology*. (Eds. Ferguson, S.B. and Wright, D.F.) Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 18.

centre was the idea of the church as a believers' fellowship (*Gemeinde*) versus the church as a state church (*Volkskirche*).²¹⁶

It is remarkable how closely these categories correspond with those in Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*: namely, 'visible church-community,' 'obedient discipleship,' and 'suffering in love'. His principled pacifism was not far from Mennonite theology, which 'stressed scriptural themes often omitted in the historic creeds and confessions, especially Christ's way of suffering love, the life of Christian discipleship and obedience, and the nature of the believers' church as separated from the world.'²¹⁷

Monastic elements may be found in another branch of the Anabaptists, the Hutterites, who practised community of goods. In their membership ceremony, 'the novice would have one last look at all the possessions she or he had brought to community. The material goods were placed on one side of the room, and the community members on the other. One last look – a final choice.'²¹⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette sees in these Anabaptist groups

manifestations of a continuing strain in Christianity which had been present from the very beginning and which before and since the Reformation has expressed itself in many forms. It was seen in the Christians of the first century who, impressed by the wickedness of the world, sought so far as possible to withdraw from it and live in it as distinct communities but not to be of it.²¹⁹

Intentional community was important to Count von Zinzendorf who, together with some Moravian refugees, founded the village of Herrnhut on his land and became bishop of its church. His Pietist zeal was instrumental in sending missionaries from Herrnhut overseas, including Pennsylvania where the Moravians began a colony led by August Spangenberg.

It was this group and its leader whom John Wesley encountered in 1735, whose inner assurance was so crucial to his own awakening. After his heart was 'strangely warmed' in 1738, he went to Germany to meet von Zinzendorf and spend a few days at Herrnhut. Here he learned some of the methods that he later introduced in Methodism. For example, 'after the Moravian pattern, the societies were at first divided into 'bands' to aid their members in

²¹⁶ *ibid.*

²¹⁷ Loewen, H.J.L. 1988. 'Mennonite theology' in *New dictionary of theology*. Ed. Ferguson, S.B. and Wright, D.F. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 420.

²¹⁸ Janzen, D. 2005. 'Mark 6: intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 92.

²¹⁹ Latourette, *A history of Christianity*, 786.

the nourishment of the Christian life.’²²⁰ As Wilson-Hartgrove points out, present-day United Methodists ‘have come to understand that Methodism itself consists of many ‘monastic’ practices that arose in England during a time when monasticism was officially illegal. Wesley’s class system and cell groups, then, can be read as monastic disciplines.’²²¹

4.2. Ecumenical ‘proto’ communities

The Protestant antecedents of intentional community are mentioned above simply by way of background to the modern, ecumenical monastic communities we examine in this section. In his book *Community of the Transfiguration*, Paul Dekar notes ‘three signs that we are in a period of renewed monastic spirituality.’²²² These are, firstly, the *growth of lay associations* permeating the barrier separating monastery from world. Regarding monasticism as a ‘yes’ to the world, Thomas Merton saw the importance of contemplation for ordinary people:

The most significant development of the contemplative life ‘in the world’ is the growth of small groups of men and women who live in every way like the laypeople around them, except for the fact that they are dedicated to God and focus all their life of work and poverty upon a contemplative centre.²²³

This phenomenon can be observed in the rising number of *oblates*, lay people (single or married) who seek to live by a Rule in association with a specific monastic community: for example, a Franciscan associated with a Cistercian monastery.²²⁴ At the 2004 new monasticism gathering referred to below (chapter IV B), it was evident that significant parallels exist between Lay, and the New, monasticism.

Though apparently dominated by those of Protestant background, a number of those from the Catholic tradition noted the wisdom of the post-Vatican II church in recognizing ‘ecclesial lay movements’ as potential works of the Spirit and have greatly encouraged them as they are left to control and limit themselves. Examples of these ecclesial movements include San Egidio, Communion and Liberation, Focolare, the Charismatic movement and the Neo-Catechumenate.²²⁵

Another sign, writes Dekar, is the vigour of *Protestant monasticism*. Notwithstanding the Reformers’ antipathy, some Protestants do not see faith and monasticism as mutually

²²⁰ *ibid.*, 1026.

²²¹ Footnote in Wilson-Hartgrove, *Report on new monasticism gathering*, 2.

²²² Dekar, *Community of the Transfiguration*, 16.

²²³ Merton, T. 2003. *The inner experience*. Ed. W.H. Shannon. San Francisco: Harper, 142. Quoted in Dekar, *Community of the Transfiguration*, 17.

²²⁴ Cf. James, M. 2008. *The history and spirituality of the lay Dominicans in South Africa, 1926-1994*. MTh thesis.

²²⁵ Houston Catholic Worker. 2004. ‘The new lay monasticism: schools for conversion’ in *Houston Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXIV, No. 5, September-October. <http://www.cjd.org/paper/newmonas.html>, link verified 13 November 2009.

exclusive. While maintaining their Reformed convictions, these people are attracted to a Catholic-type spirituality. As Michael Green observes:

What I mean is much more far-reaching ... than the Roman Catholics. I mean the renewed interest in liturgy: alternative prayer books, the influence of Taizé, the rediscovery of the Eucharist as the central and main service on a Sunday, and the astonishing hunger for retreats. I mean, too, the steady move towards a Catholic form of spirituality among large numbers of Christians who began their pilgrimage as Evangelicals.²²⁶

Dekar's third sign is the emergence of the *new monasticism*, the subject of our next section. Before we turn there, however, we explore three examples of intentional communities that function in a real sense as 'proto' communities to that movement.

4.2.1. Iona, Scotland

In the sixth century CE, Columba founded a Celtic monastery on the small island of Iona off Scotland's west coast. This site became the base of his evangelistic outreach to the Picts. Abandoned in the ninth century, a convent and Benedictine abbey were built there in the thirteenth, but the monastery was destroyed during the Reformation.

In 1938 George McLeod, a minister of the Church of Scotland, founded the Iona Community. His idea was to rebuild the Iona abbey using ministers, students and unemployed labourers. Many people were attracted to this project and, over time, an ecumenical community formed under the auspices of the Church of Scotland. The community has 'a house in Glasgow; two centres on Iona, where people could meet for prayer, common meals, and discussion; and Camas, a summer camp for young people on the nearby island of Mull.'²²⁷ On its website is this description: 'The Iona Community is a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship.'²²⁸

Members are required to adhere to a common Rule, and are concerned with issues that were true to the community's founder, Rev McLeod. These include justice and peace, action against racism and poverty, interest in human sexuality, ecumenical dialogue and communion. The community has its own ecumenical liturgy, used daily in the abbey.

²²⁶ Green, M. and Stevens, R.P. 1994. *New Testament spirituality*. Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 4.

²²⁷ Dekar, *Community of the transfiguration*, 19.

²²⁸ <http://www.iona.org.uk/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

As a pilgrimage site, the ‘sacred island’ of Iona is host to more than one hundred thousand visitors each year. Hundreds stay on in various weekly programs; others share in the work and worship of the wider community. Dekar reports a core membership of around 250, plus thousands of Associates and Friends. All community levels are bound by the Rule, which commits one to daily prayer and Bible reading, mutual sharing and accountability regarding the use of time and money, regular meeting together, action and reflection for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Community leader during the 1980s, Ron Ferguson, reflects:

The testimony of so many on Iona is that healing comes through living the questions, and not accepting easy answers. Somehow, the Church at large must work at ways of restoring real community to its heart, and intentional communities such as Iona can offer hard-won experience in the quest for such an essential recovery.²²⁹

Of interest to the reader would be the *dispersed* nature of this community, typically meeting together more in summer than in winter. While the necessity of commitment levels in such an organisation is apparent, community boundaries appear indistinct and call into question the issue of identity.

4.2.2. Taizé, France and Grandchamp, Switzerland

Self-described as a ‘parable of community’, Taizé desires its life to be ‘a sign of reconciliation between divided Christians and between separated peoples.’²³⁰ Its members are exhorted never to resign themselves to ‘the scandal of the separation of Christians, who also readily confess love for their neighbour, and yet remain divided. Be consumed with burning zeal for the unity of the Body of Christ.’²³¹ The community is made up of over one hundred monks from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant backgrounds. Like Iona, Taizé welcomes tens of thousands of pilgrims every year, mostly young people. The community was founded by Roger Schütz, affectionately known as ‘Brother Roger’, in the French municipality of Taizé during WWII. When France was overrun by Germany, Roger purchased a house to serve the war-time refugees. While fund-raising in his native Switzerland, the Gestapo occupied the house preventing his return until 1944.

²²⁹ Dekar, *Community of the transfiguration*, 20.

²³⁰ http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html, link verified 30 October 2009.

²³¹ Rule of Taizé quoted in Rakoczy, *The witness of community life*, 57.

In 1949, seven brothers committed themselves to a life following Christ in simplicity, celibacy and community. In 1969, a young Belgian doctor was the first Catholic to pledge his life to the community at Taizé. More Catholics and Orthodox brothers followed. As a result of their outreaches, fraternities of brothers associated with the community have spread around the world, including South Africa. It is the community's appeal to young people that has most captured the imagination. Since the 1960s it has become a place of pilgrimage, requiring the building of a new church and subsequent expansions. The worship experience is simple, but visually and aurally attractive, with singing done in a unique chanting style.

The beginnings of the sisterhood at Grandchamp are found in French-speaking Switzerland, where a few women in the Reformed Church were experiencing silent meditation. Annual retreats at a house in Grandchamp were organised for this purpose, but before long the need was felt to keep the house open throughout the year.

Through the friendship and support of Anglican, Orthodox and Catholic communities, they rediscovered the stream of monastic life. Thus, they carried within them, from the beginning, a concern for prayer for the unity of the church.²³²

In 1952, the first sisters committed themselves for life, adopting the Rule of Taizé and its daily Offices as the basis for their life in community and liturgical prayer. Today the community numbers about sixty sisters from Protestant backgrounds, most of whom live at Grandchamp. Like Iona, or the Taizé fraternities, there are other levels of membership: for example, the *Servants of Unity* are women who live consecrated lives in the monastic spirit, but remain in the world.

Susan Rakoczy has drawn a comparison²³³ between Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and the Taizé community. The founders of the 'House of Brethren' and the ecumenical brotherhood in France were both deeply affected by WWII, one at the end of his ministry, the other at the beginning. Both died violent deaths. Both saw as central to the Christian life a vision of community, and both communities began in the Reformed tradition.

²³² <http://www.grandchamp.org/pages/en/inspired.html>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²³³ Rakoczy, *The witness of community life*, 43ff.

Taizé's description of their own fellowship as a self-enacted 'parable' of community is close to Bonhoeffer's theological formulation of Christ-existing-as-community: it is here where revelation manifests itself in preaching, praise, prayer, or service to one another. This may be why serious-minded students seeking the real meaning of church are attracted to Taizé, where these tenets are daily practised.

Bonhoeffer's belief that the training of young seminarians belongs in 'church cloister-like schools, in which pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount and worship are taken seriously' would surely have earned Taizé a visit from Bonhoeffer, along with the English intentional communities in 1935 – had it been in existence by then. For Bonhoeffer, the value of such a visit may have rested more on the aspect of ecumenical reconciliation than on, for example, the practice of disciplines.

4.2.3. Bose, Italy

In 1965, Catholic layman Enzo Bianchi established the ecumenical monastic community of *Bose* in Piedmont, north-west Italy. For a couple of years, Enzo had been reading Scripture and praying with a small group of Catholic, Baptist and Waldensian young adults. 'They were convinced that they would become the 'little flock' open to the fulfilment of the Lord's promises only if they remained poor, small, and aware first and foremost of the importance of sharing and listening.'²³⁴

Enzo began a monastic life, visiting various intentional communities such as Taizé, the Trappists in France, and Orthodox monasteries at Mt. Athos. He was joined, a few years later, by four others including a sister from Grandchamp (see above) and a Swiss Reformed pastor. Thus, at the outset, we see features that would characterise its future existence: accepting both men and women, as well as different Christian traditions. The Rule of Bose was accepted in 1971 and the first seven members made their monastic profession two years later. Today, the community numbers over eighty from five different countries and draws thousands of visitors annually.

In all these ecumenical communities, each member agrees and adheres to a certain Rule of daily life. Likewise, whether Bonhoeffer determined to apply it during his visit to Mirfield or prior to 1935, the daily regimen was a feature at Finkenwalde. Meditation and the monastic disciplines were understood to be formative for the Christian disciple.

²³⁴ <http://www.monasterodibose.it/index.php/content/view/129/116/lang.en/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

Because it was a seminary, however, Finkenwalde’s primary purpose was to train ordinands for the Confessing church ministry – this instruction taking place after preliminary theological education at university. So where, for example, monasteries would plan labour (manual or professional) in line with the rhythm of work and worship, Finkenwalde would schedule academic lectures.

Similarly, the daily schedule of the ecumenical communities mentioned above also differs from that of more conventional monasteries, to suit their peculiar agendas. With Finkenwalde, then, they are hybrid communities, combining a particular purpose with the spiritual disciplines of monastic life. To illustrate this point, it is helpful to compare the features of their daily regimens side-by-side:

<i>Finkenwalde</i> ²³⁵	<i>Taizé</i> ²³⁶	<i>Bose</i> ²³⁷
		04h30 own <i>lectio divina</i>
rising (in silence)		06h00 community prayer
morning prayers		07h00 personal devotions
breakfast (silence)	08h15 morning prayer	08h00 work day begins
half-hour meditation	breakfast	
Routine seminary activities: course work, study, meals, etc.	10h00 ‘intro to the day’	
	reflection / discussions	
	12h20 midday prayer	12h30 community prayer
	lunch	lunch (in silence)
	14h00 song practice	14h00 work continues
	small groups / work	
	17h15 tea	17h00 personal devotions
	theme workshops	18h30 community prayer
	19h00 supper	dinner
	20h30 evening prayer	20h00 silence
21h30 evening prayer	vigil with songs	
silence	silence	

²³⁵ Busing, P.F.W. 1961. ‘Reminiscences of Finkenwalde’ in *The Christian Century* 78 (20 September 1961), 1109.

²³⁶ http://www.taize.fr/en_article5337.html, link verified 30 October 2009.

²³⁷ <http://www.monasteriodibose.it/index.php/content/view/148/125/1/0/lang.en/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

Immediately noticeable in the programme of Taizé is its relaxed, laid-back agenda. This is because, like Iona, it is a favourite ‘pilgrimage site’ of many young people. The schedule is therefore tailored to suit a life-style that is as yet unfamiliar to a disciplined personal regimen. Depending on how long the pilgrims wish to stay, there are various programmes to suit different ages. The one listed here is for designed for young adults. All programmes are centred, however, around the three times for prayer.

Likewise, the schedule at Finkenwalde suits its own purpose: in between the two long services (held around the dinner table), the bulk of the day is given to seminary activities. Yet, these activities lie between the daily devotions which frame them like bookends. Thus, the monastic rhythm of regular work and worship characterised seminary life. The services themselves were not light. Let us compare the structure of morning ‘prayers’ at Bose and at Finkenwalde (outlined in chapter II B):

<i>Bose</i> ²³⁸	<i>Finkenwalde</i> ²³⁹
opening hymn	selected choral psalm and hymn
singing of psalms	Old Testament lesson
intercession and prayer	set verse from a hymn
Old Testament reading	New Testament lesson
Gospel reading	spontaneous prayer
	recital of the Lord’s Prayer

The liturgy at Bose is based on the Latin tradition. After this fashion, the entire Psalter is sung through in two weeks, the Old Testament read through in three years, and the four Gospels in one year. Personal *lectio divina* is based on a passage agreed upon by the community: ‘listening to the Word is the only authentic source of communion,’²⁴⁰ a notion remarkably coincidental with Bonhoeffer’s own theological position.

As a Finkenwalde student recalls: ‘We rose in silence each morning, then assembled in silence in the dining room for prayers. None of us was allowed to speak before God himself had spoken to us and we had sung our morning prayer to him.’²⁴¹ Bible readings at the

²³⁸ <http://www.monasterodibose.it/index.php/content/view/148/125/lang/en/>, link verified 21 November 2009.

²³⁹ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 428.

²⁴⁰ <http://www.monasterodibose.it/index.php/content/view/148/125/1/0/lang/en/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁴¹ Busing, *Reminiscences of Finkenwalde*, 1109.

seminary ‘took the form of a *lectio continua*, if possible without any omissions, resembling Anglican evensong.’²⁴²

We see, then, that Finkenwalde and Taizé shaped their day according to a purpose that suited their requirements: young people at Taizé; seminary training at Finkenwalde. The strict programme at Bose appears to be more formal; like Taizé, its members do not accept gifts or donations, but work professionally both within and without the community. The latter instance entails teaching and hospital work in the nearby village.

Through their work brothers and sisters serve both the community and the local churches, which often feel the need to walk for a while with the community on its way, seeking together with the community a deeper understanding of biblical and spiritual issues.²⁴³

Again we see, in these intentional communities, how the monastic desire to leave the world leads to silence and solitude – and how it is precisely that quiet space which enables an authentic engagement with the world. In summary, then,

As a new form of monastic life Taizé has incarnated much of the vision of community life which Bonhoeffer envisioned: intentional community, prayer, silence, emphasis on Scripture, a form of confession of faults and sin. The hymn singing of Finkenwalde echoes in the chants of Taizé which are now sung all over the world.²⁴⁴

We now reiterate the question asked on our first page: is this the ‘new kind of monasticism’ that Bonhoeffer was calling for? Do these ‘proto’ communities in any way *restore* the church? Our contention is that they do, insofar as they exhibit the characteristics explored below. Having explored Bonhoeffer’s appreciation of monasticism and its value for the church, its implementation at Finkenwalde and other more ecumenical communities, let us turn to the phenomenon itself: the contemporary movement known as the new monasticism.

4.3. The ‘twelve marks’

Early in our introduction, we referred to Alasdair MacIntyre’s conclusion regarding the moral state of Western culture: that for civilisation to survive the ‘dark ages’ already at hand, Christians need to construct *local forms of community* that can uphold the tradition of the virtues. Hence MacIntyre’s hope for another St. Benedict.

²⁴² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 428.

²⁴³ <http://www.monasteriodibose.it/index.php/content/view/337/200/lang,en/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁴⁴ Rakoczy, *The witness of community life*, 59.

The moral crisis is due to the fragmentation of a previous, Aristotelian teleology that was discredited in the Enlightenment. However, no satisfactory alternative to the moral vindication of the virtues has been found, prompting Nietzsche to repudiate all inherited structures of moral belief and argument – exceptional people should follow their own ‘inner law’. But Nietzschean man, as MacIntyre points out, is no social animal.

To cut oneself off from shared activity in which one has initially to learn obediently as an apprentice learns, to isolate oneself from the communities which find their point and purpose in such activities, will be to debar oneself from finding any good outside of oneself. It will be to condemn oneself to that moral solipsism which constitutes Nietzschean greatness.²⁴⁵

In the final analysis, the Nietzschean stance is merely another facet of *liberal individualism* – the antithesis of *Aristotelian tradition*. These are, according to MacIntyre, the two basic moral perspectives.

In 1997, Jonathan Wilson’s book *Living faithfully in a fragmented world*²⁴⁶ drew lessons for the North American church from MacIntyre’s work. These include the fragmentation of culture, the failure of the Enlightenment project, the pivotal moment: Nietzsche or Aristotle, and the recovery of tradition. To sustain faithful witness, Wilson opined, a new movement would require:

a desire to heal the fragmentation of our lives in North American culture; a way for the whole people of God; discipline; and practices and virtues by which an undisciplined, unfaithful church might recover the discipline and faithfulness necessary to realise its mission in the world.²⁴⁷

Waiting for another ‘St. Benedict’, Wilson reasoned, is a call for a *new monasticism*. Seven years later he wrote the introduction to *School(s) for Conversion*, a remarkable document incorporating the fruit of a critical discussion concerning the construction of ‘local forms of community’. This gathering, which some believe ‘officially marks the birth of the new monasticism’,²⁴⁸ lasted several days and was convened by Wilson’s son-in-law, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. It took place in June 2004 at *Rutba House*²⁴⁹ in Durham, North Carolina, and was occasioned thus:

²⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 240.

²⁴⁶ Wilson, J. 1998. *Living faithfully in a fragmented world*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International.

²⁴⁷ Dekar, *Community of the transfiguration*, 4.

²⁴⁸ Moll, R. 2005. ‘The new monasticism’ in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 49. No. 9 (September 2005), 2.

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html> Link verified 13 November 2009.

²⁴⁹ *Rutba House* is a new monastic community located in an economically depressed quarter of Durham city.

I and my community at the Rutba House called together a group of Catholics, Anabaptists, Mainliners, and evangelicals to discuss ways in which their lives could be understood as a neo-monastic movement. We did not give them definite guidelines about what to discuss, but rather presented them with the challenges that face the church and world today: economic, political, social, sexual, and ecological.²⁵⁰

Why a new monasticism? This is a key question, one that we ask Bonhoeffer as well as contemporary monastics. At the meeting, Wilson outlined some the questions he grappled with in *Living faithfully in a fragmented world*, including: what does the new monasticism add to renewal movements that already exist in the church? What are the forms in which the new monasticism is taking shape? What is the new monasticism's relationship to the rest of the church?

These questions are essentially similar to the main issues identified on the first page of this thesis. In partial response, Wilson's introduction to *School(s) for Conversion* suggests three guiding convictions for the movement's faithful witness.²⁵¹ The new monasticism is:

- *historically-situated*. That is, they are shaped by strategic and tactical responses to their particular historical situations. In order to fulfil its *telos*, Finkenwalde was located *away* from the centre of power (Berlin); by the same token, the Sojourners community had to move *to* the centre of power (Washington, DC). The historical situation of new monasticism is informed by the influence of Empire.
- *eschatologically directed*. 'Since one of the marks of our cultural moment is the loss of any sense of *telos* and the consequent reduction of all action to the battle for power over the other, the recovery of teleological thinking and living is one ... critical task of the day.' Living *eschatologically* resists the temptations intentional communities face to either exist only for themselves, or only for the world.
- *grace dependent*. New monasticism is particularly susceptible to the temptation of heroism. 'Disciplines of grace' such as mundane tasks and spiritual disciplines resist this temptation by reminding community members of their dependence on each other and on God. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer warned against illusory ideas (the 'wish dream') that serious Christians can bring to community.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Wilson-Hartgrove, *Report on new monasticism gathering*, 1.

²⁵¹ Rutba House, *School(s) for conversion*, 3ff.

²⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 26.

Before we come to the outcome of this meeting, it is instructive to mention some of the more pertinent points²⁵³ made by various speakers – indicative of the motives behind many intentional communities. A strong theme running through discussions was recognising the difference between contemporary new monasticism and the Christian communitarian movements of 1960s and 1970s.²⁵⁴ Thus, Ivan Kauffman from *Bridgefolk* (an ecclesial movement of both Catholics and Anabaptists), warned about the

mistake of the 60's: naming the sins of racism and sexism without dealing with the evil of individualism. You cannot solve the problem with the problem ... Our means and end must be the same. Community can only be borne of community, not of individual's wish dreams and noble efforts.

Likewise, Michael Cartwright (University of Indianapolis) called for continued conversation with the 'old monasticism', noting that Parker Palmer's search for a new movement in the 1980s had 'jettisoned the experience and wisdom of the old.' Specifically, Cartwright warned against a *commodification of experience* that tempts Protestants shaped by consumerism – 'that we might 'shop for the best of Catholicism' and then move on to other markets.'

Kent McDougal (pastor, Christ Community Church) spoke of a 'down-sizing movement to counter the church-growth movement they had been part of.' Care must be taken, cautioned David Janzen (Reba Place community), that new monasticism not become an idol in the sense of being able to 'save' Western civilisation. Indeed, submitted Richard Withers, monastic life is 'irrelevant' if we regard it as a tool to change society; 'most of the great evil that has been done by human beings has been done to 'save' the world from evil.'

Such comments from committed Christians reflect, on the one hand, an intense dissatisfaction with the ecclesiastical status quo. There was present, on the other hand, a healthy respect for church tradition. In this diverse group, then, 'not unified by a shared theological tradition, or denomination, but by the wisdom of a shared legacy, and a vision of a spirituality that can shape the Christian life in postmodern society'²⁵⁵, the following characteristics or 'marks' of a new monasticism were conceived.

²⁵³ These comments are found in Wilson-Hartgrove, *Report on new monasticism gathering*, 2ff.

²⁵⁴ Referred to in our Introduction, p. 5.

²⁵⁵ Dekar, *Community of the transfiguration*, 5.

4.3.1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire

What is 'Empire'? MacIntyre's allusion to an earlier time when good people 'turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*' is key to a right understanding of this mark.

Politically, as Wilson has pointed out, the shadow of Empire informs the historical situation of a new monastic community. Where church and state have colluded, the history of monasticism has shown us the movement *away* from such collusion, rife as it is with power and its corruption. Indeed, the category of *power* has everything to do with this mark. New monastic communities seek 'abandoned' places not because they want to escape social responsibility, but precisely because these spaces are marginal to society. The people living there are largely *powerless* – as a result of economic, political, and / or sexual prejudice.

Relocation expresses conversion and commitment, the decision to resist imperial pressures and the pleasures and rewards of conformity to the way of all empires: pride, power, and the reduction of all values to the 'bottom line' ... An abandoned place is one that has no attraction for the world of what's happening now, and therefore is left alone by the political, economic, and social powers that be.²⁵⁶

This first mark thus sets the context for all the marks below.

4.3.2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us

In a yuppie (Young Urban / Upwardly-Mobile Professional) world, the point here is what Shane Claiborne from the *Simple Way* (an *anti-profit* organisation) calls 'downward mobility'. In insulating the rich from the poor, the church acts in many respects like a brokerage, a distribution centre 'where the poor come to get stuff and the rich come to dump stuff. Both go away satisfied (the rich feel good, the poor get fed), but no one leaves transformed – no new community is formed.'²⁵⁷

²⁵⁶ McKenna, M.M. 2005. 'Mark 1: relocation to abandoned places of empire' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 15.

²⁵⁷ Claiborne, S. 2005. 'Mark 2: sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 29.

Rather than a vow of poverty, therefore, a simple living *in love* (1 Corinthians 13:3) characterises this mark. Love, of course, is key – as the adage goes: ‘when we truly discover love, capitalism will not be possible and Marxism will not be necessary.’ Rebirth and redistribution go together.

4.3.3. Hospitality to the stranger

As Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf states: ‘God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other.’ Tied up in the virtue of hospitality is the identity of the stranger. It is *we*, of course, who once were aliens.

Interestingly, the spiritual ‘gift’ of hospitality is not found among those in 1 Corinthians 12, but alongside Paul’s exhortations to the Roman church to faithful prayer and brotherly love (Romans 12:13). The story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 makes it clear that hospitality is more *expectation* than gift: ‘like prayer and worship, study and fasting, offering hospitality is a spiritual discipline in which we are called – and invited – to learn and grow.’²⁵⁸

The kingdom of love initiated by Jesus is also the kingdom of love which is most clearly embodied in the Christian obligation to be hospitable. We are a community on principle ready to share our meal with the stranger. Moreover we must be a people who have hospitable selves – we must be ready to be stretched by what we know not.²⁵⁹

4.3.4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation

Acknowledging that the racial lines separating ethnic-specific churches in North America are increasingly fuzzy, Chris Rice still finds cause for lament in a segregated Sabbath. As in South Africa, the language of *us* and *them* is indicative of a spatially divided society. Several observations are pertinent here:

- the histories and trajectories of schisms, social divisions, and racialisation have become normalised – we no longer question them.

²⁵⁸ Kenney, M.R. 2005. ‘Mark 3: hospitality to the stranger’ in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 47.

²⁵⁹ Hauerwas, S. 1983. *The peaceable kingdom*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 91. Quoted in Richardson, *Sanctorum Communio in a time of reconstruction?*, 114.

- lament thus becomes a practice and task of remembering and grieving well, and prophetic communities that remember well become a sign of hope.
- social analysis is still required, however, bringing to light other strata that are themselves cause for lament.
- racial division is to be distinguished from cultural diversity, but ‘diversity as an end in itself easily becomes ethnocentrism as an end in itself.’

Unfortunately, new monastic communities have ‘tried very hard, and largely failed, to recruit members of colour.’ Part of the problem is that whites who had come to see the end of materialism were willing to mobilise downward, but African American life was on a different trajectory. Thus, when one member at the New Monasticism gathering explained the virtue of organic farming, an African American spoke up: ‘That’s all *we* had growing up, an organic farm!’

The truth was, there *was* a power differential; if things at [the community] fell apart, we whites had major resources and options to fall back on that the black members had not had enough time or social justice to gain – educational degrees, financial capital, moneyed family and networks.²⁶⁰

Moving from *power*, or from *the margins*, will mean different things to the members of an intentional community. We grapple with this phenomenon in chapter V, below.

4.3.5. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church

For Paul (and, as we have seen, Bonhoeffer) personal belief and church membership are two sides of the same coin: without personal conversion it is impossible to be a Christian, just as it is impossible to be a Christian without being part of the church. This is the context of the early Christian saying: ‘outside the church there is no salvation’, or Cyprian’s belief that ‘one cannot have God as a father who doesn’t have the church as a mother.’

The monastic inclination to separate oneself from the world carries within it the poisonous seeds of breaking from the local church. This was the mistake of many Christian communitarian movements birthed in the 1960s and 1970s; in their

²⁶⁰ Rice, C. 2005. ‘Mark 4: lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation’ in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 65.

aversion to any form of tradition or structure, they rejected the church. It is this mark that distinguishes new monasticism from those communities.

4.3.6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate

In seeking resources to support and guide the formation of novices (new members), it is helpful to consider the ‘old novitiate’. Spiritual formation, of course, has precedent in the training of the first disciples in terms of renunciation, obedience, and love for one another. The book of Acts records how the earliest believers

listened daily to the apostles’ teaching, learned a radical manner of hospitality within their new extended family, sold off capital assets to care for the needy, and worked out creative ways to distribute the goods of community so that none would be overlooked.²⁶¹

Before the cooling off of the faith in the fourth century, the Sermon on the Mount was used as a catechism of the ‘Way’ – an insight that guided Bonhoeffer at Finkenwalde. In the desert and countryside, aspirant disciples gathered in communities under Rules that were profoundly formative. Benedict’s rule, in particular, has some keen insights regarding novices:

- ‘test the spirits’ – there need to be processes by which the desire of seekers to join the community can be properly discerned.
- spiritual direction – the role of a ‘senior chosen for skill in winning souls’ is crucial to the novitiate.
- objections to the community’s rule should be dealt with before taking any vows of membership.
- in terms of renunciation, the novitiate forms the community context for personal accountability. It ‘makes discipleship real in a way that individually controlled spirituality remains forever slippery.’²⁶²

As David Janzen points out, MacIntyre’s call for another St. Benedict ‘would have sounded idolatrous to Benedict who had no intention of saving ‘Western Civilisation’ ... The new monasticism will have little of value to offer the world if it

²⁶¹ Janzen, *Mark 6*, 84.

²⁶² *ibid.*, 93.

tries to meet the needs of the world as defined by the world.’²⁶³ This contention agrees with Wilson’s conviction above about the community’s eschatological *telos* and is pertinent to our later discussion concerning relevancy.

4.3.7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community

If Christians are going to nurture the common life among members of intentional community, they must become self-aware enough to know who they are, what they are about and why they are about it. Only then can they be members of a collective that has enough in common to remain united when the mundane realities of living together in a difficult world threaten to tear them apart.²⁶⁴

The community’s *longing* for the kingdom is what characterises the wait between its inauguration and consummation. We share the meal of communion with each other even while praying for justice. That longing shapes our spirituality but is vulnerable to various hazards, including *obsession* (my salvation depends on my ushering in the kingdom here and now), *desire* (when we become takers instead of givers), *ecstasy* (divinising human sexuality), *detachment* (substituting knowledge about God for relationship with God), and *despair* (melancholia associated with religious ‘failure’). If intentional communities are to avoid these pitfalls, common life must be structured so as to allow members to ‘experience their longing for the kingdom rightly’.

4.3.8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children

In contrast to the historical Christian exclusivity of either marriage *or* celibacy, new monasticism is intentional about communities supporting *both* states of life. Instead of endorsing either one or the other, Jesus located both marriage and celibacy in the wider context of discipleship. Since there is no law regarding either state, new monastic communities can offer invaluable help to disciples trying to discern how to live. Jana Bennett suggests several ways in which such support may be given:²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Janzen, *Mark 6*, 95.

²⁶⁴ Steiner, S. and Brix, M.H. 2005. ‘Mark 7: nurturing common life among members of intentional community’ in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 100.

²⁶⁵ Bennett, J. 2005. ‘Mark 8: support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children’ in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 119.

- accountability – holding people accountable to practicing relationships that are life-giving and Christ-bearing. Needless to say, extremely difficult.
- discernment – practical guidance such as that found in church pre-marital counselling and its monastic equivalent in pre-celibate counselling.
- parenting – in a communal context, both celibates and married folk need to be responsible for raising the children.
- openness – each state needs to be intentional about relating to and seeking out the other state. Thus a celibate group might invite a family over for dinner, playing with the children and providing good adult conversation.

Interestingly, Hauerwas and Willimon locate the individual's decision in the community's eschatological identity: 'The *telos*, the end, gives meaning to our choices. Ultimately, there is for us only one good reason to get married or stay single, namely, that this has something to do with our discipleship.'²⁶⁶

4.3.9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life

While this is a practically rather than biblically based feature, it facilitates the spiritual disciplines of common prayer, common meals, mutual confession of sin, spiritual guidance, and celebration. Geographical proximity enables togetherness. New monastic communities apply this principle in various ways: shared housing, 'house churches', even committing to building a co-housing project.

A contemporary example is the community life of the *Brudershof*²⁶⁷ (now in England, the United States and Australia) that is built around the family. From children to the elderly, all participate in the daily life and work of the community – whether in the central kitchen, day-care, laundry, or in one of the community businesses.

4.3.10. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies

To understand the world as *creation* is to acknowledge its 'moral and spiritual topography in which all of life, human and non-human, is situated within the

²⁶⁶ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 66.

²⁶⁷ <http://www.churchcommunities.org/index.html>, link verified 30 October 2009.

intentions of God's own life.'²⁶⁸ Norman Wirzba has suggested four practices in which new monastics can manifest the wholeness of creation:

- grow a garden – gardening teaches us to rely more on God's grace
- support local economies / shop responsibly
- design generous households – purchase products to use communally
- practice celebration – appreciate life, in line with the Slow Food²⁶⁹ movement

4.3.11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matt 18

There appears to a dualism in American morality, observes Fred Bahnson, between the private and public spheres. It is the 'unacknowledged alliance with Empire that plagues the church in North America',²⁷⁰ the failure to see God's kingdom as a political reality. But, says Bahnson, as Bonhoeffer pointed out, Jesus doesn't want the Sermon on the Mount 'to be discussed as an ideal; he really means us to get on with it.'

Within the church we are to deal with sinners redemptively, with the purpose of restoration. If they are to be finally treated as 'Gentiles and tax collectors', we know how Jesus treated those outcasts of society. To refer again to mark #3, Wilson-Hartgrove reflects on the Iraqi hospitality he received at Rutba, and his attempt to tell the story at home:

We were telling a story about *them* helping *us*, and the [American] media wouldn't touch it. We realized that hospitality is subversive. It goes against the grain. Hospitality is really a form of peacemaking, because it blurs the boundaries between *us* and *them*.²⁷¹

4.3.12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life

If 'resistance is the fire in which we find freedom from social oppression',
'contemplation is the flame through which our own souls find liberation.'²⁷² Wilson-

²⁶⁸ Wirzba, N. 2005. 'Mark 10: care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 139.

²⁶⁹ <http://www.slowfood.com/>, link verified 30 October 2009.

²⁷⁰ Bahnson, F. 2005. 'Mark 11: peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution along the lines of Matthew 18' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 151.

²⁷¹ Undated conversation with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Quoted in Bahnson, *Mark 11*, 159.

²⁷² Wilson-Hartgrove, J. 2005. 'Mark 12: commitment to a disciplined contemplative life' in *School(s) for conversion: 12 marks of a new monasticism*. (Ed. Rutba House) Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 165.

Hartgrove completes the index to the new monasticism by describing the twelfth mark: *contemplation*.

This is the work of receiving the mind of Christ, of training our brain in faithful patterns of thought and action. Contemplation is ‘about learning to see the world through the lens of the cross.’ It is no skill or technique; not knowing what we are doing, we simply pray: ‘Into your hands I commit my spirit.’ It is ‘corporate communion with the God who is our peace. On our prayer walks the wall between spirituality and activism collapses. Resistance and contemplation are one.’²⁷³

What, then, is the ‘new monasticism’? Though a fairly ‘new’ religious movement by the standards of church history, it has been present in various forms for at least two decades – longer, if the thesis of this paper is accepted. Three European antecedents have been mentioned already: Iona, Taizé and Bose. In the light of the inaugural ‘Twelve Marks’ above, it is now worth mentioning two American examples of contemporary communities born in the new monastic tradition.

In 2003, Jonathan and Leah Wilson-Hartgrove travelled to Iraq to protest the American invasion of that country. While travelling, an injured member of their convoy was cared for in the town of Rutba, in an Iraqi hospital recently hit by American bombs. Accepting no payment, the doctor requested only that Jonathan and Leah ‘tell the world what happened in Rutba’.²⁷⁴

On their return to the United States, the Wilson-Hartgroves moved to Walltown, a black neighbourhood outside Durham. Inviting some local residents to join them, they began *Rutba House*, an intentional community practicing racial reconciliation. Community commitment, however,

involved more than moving into a poor neighbourhood. They developed specific disciplines, all practiced by Jesus and followed by the monastics of the Early Church, to be shared by all who join their community. Hospitality, prayer, fasting, simplicity, peacemaking, celebration and song are embraced and lived out at Rutba House as a means of serving God through love of neighbour.²⁷⁵

²⁷³ *ibid.*, 172.

²⁷⁴ O’Neill, P. 2005. ‘The new monasticism in Durham’s Walltown, a covenant community’ in *Divinity Online Edition*, Vol. 5. No. 1 (Fall 2005), 1. Internet article at <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/publications/2005.09/features/monasticism/01.htm>, link verified 18 February 2010.

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 2.

In new monastic terminology, Walltown is an ‘abandoned place’. In a part of the city from which many are seeking to escape, the witness of a living community countering the pull of the suburbs speaks more powerfully than words.

Kensington in Philadelphia may be described similarly. As ‘Pennsylvania’s poorest neighbourhood’²⁷⁶, it is literally abandoned. Here, Shane Claiborne and six others formed *The Simple Way* in 1998 by purchasing a condemned building, cleaning it up and moving in. Publicly advocating for the poor, this community impacts its neighbourhood house by house. ‘Though community life is not strictly regulated, [members] devote their spare time to personal Bible study and prayer, Simple Way activities, or local ministries, like helping neighbourhood children with their homework or simply playing with them.’²⁷⁷

In their evangelical desire to directly challenge racial and class divisions, *The Simple Way* and *Rutba House* have not taken typically Protestant forms. They are representative, rather, of a more ancient kind of faith-community. Rob Moll characterises these movements as

the latest wave of evangelicals who see in community life an answer to society’s materialism and the church’s complacency toward it. Rather than enjoy the benefits of middle-class life, these suburban evangelicals choose to move in with the poor. Though many of the same forces drive them as did earlier generations – a desire to experience intense community and to challenge contented evangelicalism – they are turning to an ancient tradition to provide the spiritual sustenance for their ministries.²⁷⁸

Another writer describes the movement as a ‘new take’ on an old tradition by contemporary communities

who think the church in the United States has too easily accommodated itself to the consumerist and imperialist values of the culture. Living in the corners of the American empire, they hope to be a harbinger of a new and radically different form of Christian practice. These ‘new monastics’ pursue the ancient triumvirate of poverty, chastity and obedience, but with a twist. Their communities include married people whose pledge to chastity is understood as a commitment to marital fidelity. Poverty means eschewing typical middle-class economic climbing but not total indigence – some economic resources are necessary for building this desert kingdom. Obedience means accountability not to an abbot but to Jesus and to the community.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁶ Moll, *The new monasticism*, 3.

²⁷⁷ *ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 1.

²⁷⁹ Byassee, J. 2005. ‘The new monastics: alternative Christian communities’ in *The Christian Century* (18 October 2005), 1. Internet article at <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1399>, link verified 13 November 2009.

Part of the new 'twist' is an appreciation of technology. 'These communities' eager use of the Internet reveals some of what is new in the new monasticism. They do not reject technology as such. They embrace the Internet, as it serves their purposes of linking similar Christian communities to one another and sharing resources.'²⁸⁰

4.4. Conclusion

Naturally, the new monastic movement is not without its critics. We mention two objections linked, importantly, to the 'Twelve Marks'. Anthony Grimley has echoed the concern of mark #5, *submission to the church*:

There is a danger that new monasticism is being developed into a leisure activity and a facility for people to use in their despondency with Church ... An effect that a pick and mix society is having on new monasticism is a manipulation of traditional monastic values and spirituality in order to clean, refresh and re-package monasticism to make it easier to live with and more socially acceptable.²⁸¹

Another criticism of new monasticism is its lack of diversity. The challenge of *transcending racial and class divisions* was mentioned in mark #4 above. Despite their enthusiastic involvement in poorer communities, new monastics are typically 'young and white and single.'²⁸² In this regard, the following American example is equally pertinent in South Africa:

One of the Sojourners' original goals was to serve some of the tens of thousands of refugees displaced to San Francisco as a result of the civil war in El Salvador. Three Salvadoran families joined the church and benefited from its legal clinic and job preparation aid. As soon as they acquired the resources, the families promptly bought minivans, left the church and moved to the suburbs. *Perhaps those who have less of a chance at pursuing the American dream are not yet ready to be disenchanted with it.*²⁸³

Is this 'dissatisfaction' with the American dream the prerogative of whites? In this country, where the 'South African' dream is threatened by the cultural hegemony of Empire economics, the question is a vital one, impacting on the local relevance of the new monasticism.

²⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 2.

²⁸¹ Grimley, A. 2008. *25 years of new monasticism*. PDF file at [http://www.monos.org.uk/images/file/New%20Monasticism\(1\).pdf](http://www.monos.org.uk/images/file/New%20Monasticism(1).pdf), link verified 22 November 2009.

²⁸² Andersen, J. 2007. 'A carnival for Christ' in *Sojourners Magazine* (January 2007), 2. Internet article at <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0701&article=070122>, link verified 13 November 2009.

²⁸³ Byassee, *The new monastics*, 5. My italics.

Chapter 5. Relevance of the new monasticism

It seems fashionable for writers to introduce their articles and theses with talk of a profound ‘crisis’ in the discipline they are contributing to – with the tacit assumption, of course, that their input goes a long way to resolving said crisis. As every author knows, that structure – crisis > intervention > problem solved – is key to the plot of a novel. It seems key too, in many instances, to academic writing. Without being proved in the warmth of peer review, some fantastic theories have wound their way onto the baking trays of pseudo-scientific religious literature. Is the ‘new monasticism’ just another such fad? Invoking a crisis, postulating a redemptive movement, with dubious success?

Responsible scholarship is less confident (or more humble), it seems, regarding its own opinion. Thus Bosch in *Transforming Mission*, while acknowledging the current crisis in mission²⁸⁴, will only suggest an *interim* definition: ‘Ultimately, mission remains undefinable [*sic*]; it should never be incarcerated in the narrow confines of our own predilections. The most we can hope for is to formulate some approximations of what mission is all about.’²⁸⁵ Such modesty can be really frustrating in the academic enterprise, resembling a logarithmic curve approaching ever closer to an axis but never touching. How can we ever *know* something? Exacerbating this limbo is the pervasive penchant for political correctness.

MacIntyre’s striking conclusion to his erudite analysis of the moral crisis in *After Virtue* is, by contrast, all the more startling. The bold language of ‘Empire’, of a new ‘dark ages’, of barbarians already among us, of another St. Benedict – are things really that bad? Indeed, he contends: it is our singular ‘lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.’²⁸⁶

As we have seen, Wilson has proposed that the new monasticism can effectively model an *alternative* society. ‘Alternative’, however, to what? It is clear that intentional communities understand their missions quite variously. Even internally, within the same community, where members stand on an upward or downward economic trajectory can make a substantial difference to individual interpretations of what needs doing.

5.1. In the West

Nevertheless, in the West there appears to be large agreement among new monastic communities regarding the identity of Empire and the ‘dark ages’. The U.S. government is

²⁸⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 2f.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 9.

²⁸⁶ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 245.

understood in terms of power and the abuse thereof; the Dark Age is portended by various calamities: for example, environmental disaster, economic disparity, and human trafficking. In other words, new monasticism in North America (especially in its work for justice) has a peculiarly ‘1960s’ tang, a distinctly anarchist flavour. What makes the movement discrete from typical political activist groups, however, is its underlying spirituality: a *monastic* grasp of time, of listening, of love for the Other – all in the context of intentional community self-consciously committed to the church.

At this point, we are drawn back to Janzen’s contention that the call for another St. Benedict ‘would have sounded idolatrous to Benedict who had no intention of saving ‘Western Civilisation’’ (mark #6 above). That monasticism *did* produce disciplined communities capable of sustaining the virtues of civilised life, at a time when the church was hopelessly entwined with Empire, begs the question: is the church itself morally incapable? Is it unable, in other words, to maintain its own ethics apart from the state?

In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas and Willimon think not. Especially at a political level, the church embodies a new and different ethic:

The challenge is not the intellectual one but the political one ... The call to be part of the gospel is a joyful call to be adopted by an alien people, to join a countercultural phenomenon, a new *polis* called church ... The challenge of Jesus is the political dilemma of how to be faithful to a strange community, which is shaped by a story of how God is with us.²⁸⁷

Thus, ‘the church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church *is* a social strategy.’²⁸⁸ However, practice has shown – in the United States, at least – that both the conservative (= private) and liberal (= public) churches are basically accommodationist (= Constantinian) in their social ethic. ‘Both assume wrongly that the American church’s primary social task is to underwrite American democracy.’²⁸⁹

John Howard Yoder perceives the church in similar categories. Distinguishing between *activist* and *conversionist* churches, he posits a third alternative: the *confessing* church which ‘finds its main political task to lie, not in the personal transformation of individual

²⁸⁷ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 24 and 30.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 43.

²⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 32.

hearts or the modification of society, but rather in the congregation's determination to worship Christ in all things.²⁹⁰

We would like a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God's kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price.²⁹¹

It is difficult not to hear, in the desire of this alternative to be the church 'visible', an echo from Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*. Constantinian thinking is just as strong today as it was in the fourth century. 'It leads Christians to judge their ethical positions, not on the basis of what is faithful to our peculiar tradition, but rather on the basis of how much Christian ethics Caesar can be induced to swallow without choking.'²⁹² The Sermon on the Mount, in contrast,

makes necessary the formation of a colony, not because disciples are those who have a need to be different, but because the Sermon, if believed and lived, makes us different, shows us the world to be alien, an odd place where what makes sense to everybody else is revealed to be opposed to what God is doing among us.²⁹³

Another contrast between 'confessing' or visible church thinking and Constantinian thought is the latter's preoccupation with heroic individualism:

The Sermon on the Mount cares nothing for the European Enlightenment's infatuation with the individual self as the most significant ethical unit. For Christians, the church is the most significant ethical unit ... All Christian ethics are social ethics because all our ethics presuppose a social, communal, political starting point – the church.²⁹⁴

As Bonhoeffer himself discovered, 'Christian ethics arise out of the formation of the peculiar community engendered by listening to scripture like the Sermon on the Mount and attaching ourselves to a master like Jesus.'²⁹⁵ The church makes Christians by *example*; discipleship is learning from those who are good at living the Christian faith. This was the rationale behind the House of the Brethren.

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 45.

²⁹¹ *ibid.*, 48.

²⁹² *ibid.*, 72.

²⁹³ *ibid.*, 74.

²⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 81.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 99.

An acid test for the church as *colony* or alternative society, then, would be regarding the ministers its seminaries are turning out. Certainly in the West, the trend is not hopeful:

The seminaries have produced clergy who are agents of modernity, experts in the art of congregational adaptation to the cultural status quo, enlightened facilitators whose years of education have trained them to enable believers to detach themselves from the insights, habits, stories, and structures that make the church the church.²⁹⁶

It is because the church in the West is *not* the church, then, that new monasticism has found appeal and traction among those who seek an unadulterated religion. We recall Bethge's reason why Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* found almost instant popularity in pre-war Germany: 'Finkenwalde had revealed a weak spot within Protestantism and, moreover, had sought practical solutions where others felt helpless.'²⁹⁷ To a large extent, the new monastic movement is a response to the manifold 'weak spots' in contemporary Protestantism. Where the church is a sign of guilt rather than innocence, of corruption rather than virtue, that is where the pull-factor away from church will be experienced most strongly.

In his paper²⁹⁸ presented at the seventh *International Bonhoeffer Congress* in Cape Town, Geoffrey Kelly described three idolatries that underwrite contemporary American 'freedom':

- the worship of material prosperity
- the homage paid to consumerism and government's increasing harshness towards the non-productive people of society
- the idolatry of national security with its consequent militarism and cult of violence as a means of solving national and international problems

Since this congress took place in 1996, Kelly's analysis reflects the tenure of George Bush, Sr. and his Republican administration's engagement with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Kelly cogently applies Bonhoeffer's theological arguments to the American church situation – its obligation to the victims of state legislation, its willingness to suffer with the economically weak and act prophetically for peace. To find the peace of Jesus in the United States, says Kelly, 'reconciliation of the disparate segments of American society and a deeper sense of Christian community are needed.'²⁹⁹

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 116.

²⁹⁷ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 469.

²⁹⁸ Kelly, G.B. 1997. 'The idolatrous enchainment of church and state: Bonhoeffer's critique of freedom in the United States' in *Bonhoeffer for a new day: theology in a time of transition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 298-318.

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 299.

Insofar as these elements are not important to the established Western church, the claims of new monasticism have to be taken seriously.

5.2. *In South Africa*

The subject of this paper has to do with a Western phenomenon. The story of Bonhoeffer and Finkenwalde unfolds in pre-war Germany; the new monastic examples cited are European, American, and even Australian³⁰⁰. The question now arises as to the movement's relevance outside of the West and, more locally, in this country. It follows that if certain conditions in South Africa parallel those which stimulated new monasticism in Europe and America, we should see the formation of similar intentional communities.

It is a complex question that is bound up with the ongoing development of South African society. Field research into the existence of local new monastic communities is the subject of another thesis, but it is certainly legitimate to ask concerning the *relevance* of new monasticism in this country. In other words, do conditions conducive to its development exist here as they do in the West?

It is this author's contention that in South Africa, the new monasticism – at least as advocated by the 'twelve marks' – is not readily transferable. That is, this country does not share some of the conditions key to the conception of the new monasticism as practiced in Europe and America. These criteria would include:

- **Political.** We have already explored the idea of 'empire', the first Mark and cornerstone of the new monasticism. In keeping with early monasticism, a new monastic view of the role of government is decidedly negative. Following MacIntyre's analysis of Western morality, new monastics are profoundly sceptical regarding government's ability to sustain 'the virtues'.

The movement is *away* from centralised power, with its attendant potential for corruption, and *towards* the margins inhabited by the powerless. By contrast, as we will see below, the South African government's approach to society's powerless is marked by a commitment to the poor – a commitment

³⁰⁰ See reference to the *Community of the Transfiguration* on page 1.

that has secured a ‘critical solidarity’ from the church.

- **Economic.** Commensurate with the wealth that has accrued to societies in the developed world is a Western disillusionment regarding the ‘rewards’ of economic empowerment. As discussed under the fourth Mark, Lament for Racial Divisions, whites and blacks are often on different economic trajectories: some are moving from power, others towards it.

When, as in South Africa, the movement is largely *towards* financial capital, the idea of intentional poverty (or even simple living) is positively alien. To repeat Byassee: ‘Perhaps those who have less of a chance at pursuing the American dream are not yet ready to be disenchanted with it.’³⁰¹ Insofar as that dream still enchants most South Africans, new monastic communities will struggle to take root.

- **Theological.** We have referred to the ‘critical solidarity’ of this country’s mainline church towards the state’s development program, discussed below. Another stance representing a significant sector of South Africa’s churches, and one overlapping with our previous point, is the ‘prosperity theology’ espoused by many Charismatics. The amount of television airtime allocated to churches propagating this theology seems to indicate large numbers of adherents.

A third position is the acquiescence to the status-quo commonly adopted by apolitical congregations with a privatised faith. In South Africa, among such established theologies there appears to be little attention given to an alternative politics questioning both collusion with the state and wealth creation.

It is not surprising, then, that there exists no burgeoning new monasticism in South Africa. Key parallel conditions in the West do not hold true for this country. Of course, insofar as the Twelve Marks do not define contemporary monasticism, intentional communities may well assume their own local flavour and chart their own manifesto. It is remarkable how close our own country’s political experience is to the roots of the new monasticism.

³⁰¹ *The new monastics*, 5.

In South Africa, the church has borne the stigma of collusion with the state, of collaboration with Empire. Probably more than any other local scholar, John de Gruchy has demonstrated Bonhoeffer's relevance in this regard. In 1973, for example, he called for the South African church to accept its share in the guilt of the nation – just as Bonhoeffer did in his. Such acknowledgement 'is a sign of strength, of moral courage and integrity. It is a prelude to healing, and a means of preventing disaster. The longer we repress our guilt, the longer it will take for us to come to terms with our history, to face ourselves and one another without illusion.'³⁰² What does this mean, then, for a guilty church? May it continue to proclaim? While the search for integrity is crucial, de Gruchy continues,

the Church does not have to become a model for society before it can speak prophetically to the nation; indeed, there will never be a time when the Church has earned the right to do so on the basis of its own purity. The Church speaks out of a position of shared guilt, not self-righteousness, and while its criticism must always begin within its own life, part of that self-criticism should awaken it to its responsibility to the nation.³⁰³

During the Dark Age of apartheid, the question of a *status confessionis* and the formation of a South African 'confessing church' became pertinent. In the 1960s, Beyers Naudé saw the role of his Christian Institute as the spearhead of a 'confessing movement.' At the insistence of Manas Buthelezi, a *status confessionis* was actually declared by the Lutheran World Federation at Dar es Salaam in 1977. Similarly, at the insistence of Allan Boesak, apartheid was declared a heresy in 1982 by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Belhar Confession of the same year, like the Barmen declaration, 'takes as its point of departure the fact that a *status confessionis* exists today within South Africa.'³⁰⁴

Intriguingly, de Gruchy questions whether Bonhoeffer's 1932 statement that 'the *first* confession of the Christian community before the world is the *deed*' does not imply that we should confess our faith no longer in word but only in deeds.³⁰⁵ Certainly for Bonhoeffer, confession was something necessarily concrete. In a plethora of confessional statements, de Gruchy can speak of the 'confessing deed' that points beyond itself 'to the liberating Lordship of Jesus Christ, and in so doing becomes genuine witness and confession.'³⁰⁶

³⁰² In Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: exile and martyr*, 33.

³⁰³ *ibid.*, 35.

³⁰⁴ de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 137.

³⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 138.

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 140.

Paradoxically, writes de Gruchy, apartheid strengthened Christianity. ‘While some churches were embraced and seduced by political and economic power, others clarified their theology and sharpened their witness in their fight against apartheid.’³⁰⁷ It has been since the advent of democracy in 1994, however, that the question of relevance becomes more urgent. The vision of *shalom*, of the reconstruction of society, may have filled the horizon – but what does that mean for new monasticism? Returning to Janzen, is he fair in assuming that Benedict would not want to ‘save Western Civilisation’? What if Caesar adopted the virtues necessary for moral regeneration? How would St. Benedict respond to such cooperation between church and state?

After 1994, instead of *resistance* the South African Council of Churches adopted a new attitude towards the state, that of ‘critical solidarity.’ Reconstruction, said Charles Villa-Vicencio, would involve theological wisdom and contextual decision-making:

Utopian visions created by prophets, preachers and poets are important ingredients in the process of reconstruction. Ultimately, however, these visions need to be translated into societal practice and laws operative in the here and now. This practice and these laws will necessarily fall short of the projected vision, but must provide the basis and vision for the long walk to social and economic freedom beyond political liberation.³⁰⁸

The secular vision of the new society in South Africa was summed up in the Reconstruction and Development Programme, or RDP. In support, Liz Carmichael calls for a *spirituality of reconstruction* that seeks to be ‘a channel of God’s work in the context of these immense needs. The work entails a co-operative effort to restore and develop persons and community ... The spirituality that underpins it must combine fundamental values with the practical skills of development.’³⁰⁹

She goes on to suggest that these ‘fundamental values’ are in fact the Christian virtues of the New Testament, and that such a spirituality calls for *two poles*: one of silence, the other of involvement with people – a theme developed by Trevor Hudson. Aligned to these poles might be developed a kind of active retreat,

‘pilgrimages of pain and hope’, in which people mainly from a more affluent background entered into an eight-day reflective encounter with suffering and with

³⁰⁷ Richardson, *Sanctorum Communio in a time of reconstruction?*, 100.

³⁰⁸ Villa-Vicencio, C. 1992. No source provided for original quote, 8. Quoted in Carmichael, E.D.H. 1996. ‘Creating newness: the spirituality of reconstruction’ in *Archbishop Tutu: prophetic witness in South Africa*. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 185f.

³⁰⁹ Carmichael, *Creating newness*, 191.

people who, amid the suffering, 'refuse to become prisoners of hopelessness ... Encountering these 'signs of hope' challenges the pilgrims to examine their own faith-responses within the present historical moment.³¹⁰

Another element of 'reconstruction spirituality' might be *service in solidarity of others*,

of critical importance for South Africa at this time of reconstruction when many, especially but not only whites, who have been privileged with a good education and training are tempted to withdraw from public responsibility and pursue goals of self-interest.³¹¹

Still another element is the *confession of guilt*. Offered on behalf of the Dutch Reformed church by Professor Willie Jonker at the 1990 Rustenburg Conference, this 'opened up a new dynamic at the Conference, pointed the way beyond the impasse of the past, and led to further reflection on the extent of the church's guilt in South Africa.'³¹² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an example of how the state has persuaded South Africans to deal with their past, appointing – significantly – a church leader (rather than, for example, a judge) as the commission's chairperson.

What we are attempting to expose here is the high degree of collaboration here between church and state: the SACC speaks of critical 'solidarity', Villa-Vicencio of vision being translated into law; Carmichael of a 'co-operative effort' and an 'underpinning' spirituality. The RDP has become a vision guiding both church and Empire – for the benefit of all, as Desmond Tutu is wont to say, 'the rainbow people of God'.

De Gruchy has suggested that a reconstruction spirituality for a fast-secularising South Africa may be better served by Bonhoeffer's prison theology than the pietism operating at Finkenwalde:

The church in South Africa has to learn, and learn quickly, how to be the 'church for others' in a post-Constantinian, multi-faith context where the privileges of dominance are fading, and where there is considerable antipathy toward Christianity because of the dominant role it played in colonialism and throughout the apartheid era. Within such a context Bonhoeffer's fragmentary thoughts on the 'discipline of the secret,' and the connection he made between prayer and righteous action, are particularly relevant.³¹³

³¹⁰ Hudson, T. 1995. *Signposts to spirituality*. Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 92. Quoted in Carmichael, *Creating newness*, 197.

³¹¹ de Gruchy, *The reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa*, 361.

³¹² *ibid.*, 362.

³¹³ *ibid.*, 364.

As we have seen, this *arcane discipline* was the tradition of the early church

which had attempted to preserve both a sense of the ‘sacred’ and respect for the ‘Christian mysteries’ against secular or pagan profanation. In this matter, though, [Bonhoeffer] is just as eager to preserve these ‘mysteries’ against ‘*religious* profanation.’ The words of Christians and their self-righteous pretensions have lost any claim to credibility in an era of gospel spoliation through acts of injustice perpetrated by Christians and abetted by the churches.³¹⁴

To what extent, however, is ‘antipathy toward Christianity’ and ‘gospel spoliation’ the *norm* in South Africa? Where the church is still a sign of guilt rather than of hope, it may well be pragmatic for Christian groups to seriously consider adopting such a spirituality. Precisely as a function of their ‘hiddenness,’ such groups will not attract much attention. To them, the prophetic action is more important than the prophetic word.

New monastic communities, by contrast, have a public face to their devotion. Their emphasis on community and solidarity with the powerless establish them as the church visible, even while living monastically on the margins. Internally guided by a communal wisdom in line with their peculiar *telos*, they regard the state with its programs critically. With Benedict, they challenge the established church:

- power still tends to corrupt!
- where is your prophetic critique?
- good critique requires critical distance!

Government acts of omission or commission regarding the AIDS pandemic and the ‘arms deal’, crime statistics that still shock, an alarming increase in the gap between rich and poor: many of the crises which preoccupy the attention of the public media seem not to raise the ire of a church whose voice has grown strangely muted.

5.3. Conclusion

Our concluding question is one that Bonhoeffer would ask: where is the ‘church-visible’? Neville Richardson has commended the stance of Stanley Hauerwas, who

sees in Bonhoeffer’s insistence on the visibility of the church the signs of a turning away from Constantinianism, for in its visibility the church must distinguish itself

³¹⁴ Kelly, G.B. 1984. *Liberating faith: Bonhoeffer’s message for today*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 136.

from the state. This visibility, Bonhoeffer believed, was essential to the kind of social life that alone would be viable in the period of reconstruction after the war.³¹⁵

What, then, will be the relationship between such a visible church and the secular state?

The church must always stand over against the state because of the church's conviction that history is in God's hands and not under state control. These dual roles of both engaging and challenging, of supporting and standing over against the state will clearly position the church in a prophetic stance.³¹⁶

In South Africa, it is difficult to see how de Gruchy's 'arcane' community can adopt such a critical stance. On the other hand, it is precisely this stance that since the time of Finkenwalde has commended the new monastic community.

It is fair to say that the establishment of ecumenical communities in the twentieth century by Protestants with a Catholic-style spirituality has broken across religious stereotypes. Iona's work for justice, Taizé's ministry of reconciliation and the contemplative lifestyle of Bose are highly suggestive of the new monasticism and may certainly be recognised as such. Wilson's criteria for the movement, that it be 'historically situated', 'eschatologically directed', and 'grace-dependent', are universally applicable: respectively, they are the 'where,' 'what' and 'how' of intentional community. The question remains, however, whether St. Benedict would wish to 'save' Western civilisation at all. For, in South Africa at least, America's idols are fast becoming our own.

³¹⁵ Richardson, *Sanctorum Communio in a time of reconstruction?*, 115.

³¹⁶ *ibid.*

Chapter 6. Conclusion

On one level, it is plain to see that the ‘monastic’ curriculum at Finkenwalde has much in common with the daily rhythms of new monastic practice. The seminary’s regimen of ‘piety, study, classes in theology and preaching, services of all sorts to one another, meals together, worship, leisure, and play’³¹⁷ is coincident to a high degree with, for example, those at the ecumenical communities of Taizé and Bose. Meditation and confession, however out of place in a Protestant setting, were intrinsic to the students’ regular schedule.

On another level, however, we realise that Bonhoeffer’s call for a new monasticism is more concerned with *intention* than with structure. The regimen was simply the most suitable means to attain a higher goal: that of ‘church restoration’. To recap the principal quotation: ‘The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ.’

We must not lose sight of the fact that Finkenwalde was a seminary. Bonhoeffer was training ordinands for the Lutheran ministry. Notwithstanding his ecumenical responsibilities and work for the Confessing church, his main aim was to provide his students not only with the necessary tools for ministry but also the spiritual resources to enhance their service to others – all in the cause of church restoration. It would be Finkenwalde’s *products*, Bonhoeffer’s ‘disciples’, that were called to restore the church.

At the same time, at its core Finkenwalde was a monastic community. Earlier, we explored a chapter in that little self-portrait of community, *Life Together*, entitled ‘Ministry’. Introduced with reference to the disciples’ power-struggle in Luke 9:46, Bonhoeffer spells out what church restoration would look like in terms of Christian service. To recollect, these are the ministries:

- of holding one’s tongue
- of meekness
- of listening
- of helpfulness
- of bearing
- of proclaiming

³¹⁷ Kelly, *Editor’s introduction to the English edition*, 14.

- of authority

We have no doubt that these virtues, inculcated through both spiritual discipline and academic rigour, formed the warp and woof of the ordinands' training – what Kelly calls the 'sustaining power for their ministry of life.'³¹⁸ Truly, this kind of ministry forged in the fire of a monastic austerity could not but help remodel a fresh faith – even a new church, after the spiritual disaster of Nazi-style Christianity.

However, it was precisely that cultural background which determined Bonhoeffer's view of the church and the value of monasticism. A 'new' monasticism was called for, not because the 'old' had nothing to offer, but because the church needed a *political* re-establishment. This was a key ingredient lacking, as Janzen suggested, in traditional monasticism. A political self-awareness, combined with the spiritual vitality and discipline of monasticism, would constitute the force required to bring about the restoration of the church.

Whether the appropriation of Bonhoeffer's statement by new monastics as a departure point for their movement is legitimate or not, depends on how they understand the nature of that movement. Critically, do they see themselves as restoring the church – or restoring the state? Monasticism has typically been a move away from Empire. In the autocratic hegemony that characterised the Nazi regime, it is not difficult to discern Bonhoeffer's attitude to Caesar. For him, faith was *inescapably* political.

In the post-modern era of liberal democracy, particularly those with a strong social welfare programme, the picture is not as sharply defined. As we have seen, the identity of Empire is interpreted variously from group to group. Yet, it remains the first mark of the new monastic movement. It may be helpful here to recap the marks in abbreviated form:

1. relocation to the abandoned places of Empire
2. sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us
3. hospitality to the stranger
4. lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation
5. humble submission to Christ's body, the church

³¹⁸ Kelly, *Editor's introduction to the English edition*, 20.

6. intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate
7. nurturing common life among members of intentional community
8. support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children
9. geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life
10. care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies
11. peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matt 18
12. commitment to a disciplined contemplative life ³¹⁹

Comparing these characteristics with Bonhoeffer's experiment at Finkenwalde, it is not difficult to check those marks which characterised that intentional community. Let us consider them briefly.

As Wilson has suggested, to accomplish its purpose within the Confessing church, the seminary was *located away* from the centre of power. This was how the Preachers' Seminaries managed to continue training ordinands for another two to three years, after which they had to relocate. The community lived simply. *Economic resources*, obtained through the generosity of various sponsors, were shared equally. With Bonhoeffer contributing the greater portion, the House of Brethren lived on a common purse.

Lament for racial divisions and the active pursuit of a just reconciliation was a chief reason why the Confessing church was established. As the director of a Confessing seminary, Bonhoeffer was one of this mark's most vocal advocates. More personally, his early theological contributions regarding the nature of *the church* underpinned its praxis at Finkenwalde. Indeed, he asserted that the limits of the church are the limits of salvation. This is the basis of his controversial claim that 'anyone who knowingly separates himself from the Confessing Church in Germany separates himself from salvation.'

Intentional spiritual formation was firmly implemented, albeit according to Bonhoeffer's 'rule' rather than along the lines of the old novitiate. Likewise, the *common life* was nurtured to a limited degree for ordinands staying for the requisite six months, but to a high degree among the House of Brethren long-termers. *Geographical proximity* was facilitated by the acquisition of a large manor house wherein dwelt the students and faculty (Bonhoeffer and his assistant, Wilhelm Rott). As we have seen, the Sermon on the Mount provided a theological justification of *peacemaking*. Finally,

³¹⁹ <http://www.newmonasticism.org/12marks.php>, link verified 30 October 2009.

the jeers from sibling seminaries lampooning the practice of meditation at Finkenwalde bear ample testimony to its *contemplative* curriculum.

There are a few marks, however, that did not characterise the seminary. For example, although it occasionally sheltered victims of anti-Semitic violence and specifically promoted the House of Brethren as a retreat centre, Finkenwalde had no consistent ministry of *hospitality*. In view of its constituency, moreover, support for *celibate singles alongside married couples* cannot be said to have been a characteristic mark. Neither, unsurprisingly, was *environmental concern* a critical issue yet for community life in the 1930s.

Based on these characteristics, it is clear that the intentional community at Finkenwalde may be identified with the new monastic movement. Certainly, it met all of Wilson's criteria: with respect to Empire, it responded creatively to its historic purpose. Eschatologically directed, the House of Brethren retained a sense of the 'big picture' – even as its members went to war. And, in its very human attempt at life together, the community remained largely dependent on grace.

Was Bonhoeffer calling for a new tradition, distinct from the church? Or was he simply suggesting that the monastic disciplines be restored to the church? If we are to understand Bonhoeffer's theology as a *whole*, as André Dumas insists, we must see the church as Christ

not only entering into solidarity with the reality of the world, but becoming his deputy or representative – whether that reality was the Prussian state church of his twenties, the independent Confessing Church of the Nazi Germany of his thirties, or the 'non-religious' church witnessing through politics and prison as he approached his forties. At every stage along the way the church is allied with humanity, rediscovering its structures concretely.³²⁰

That does not mean, of course, being allied to the state! Reflecting on the church's public vocation, Rasmussen writes:

An eschatological community of the cross moves, like Jesus, to those places in society where the mortal flaws of human community are most obvious. There it takes up its ministry, as participation in God's suffering with and for others. Almost by definition those are the abandoned places of the forgotten, powerless, exiled or poor. By definition, then, the community of the cross looks for salvation where the wider public normally does not look.³²¹

³²⁰ Dumas, A. 1971. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: theologian of reality*. London: SCM, 91f. Quoted in Richardson, *Sanctorum Communio in a time of reconstruction?*, 102.

³²¹ Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – his significance for North Americans*, 85.

Perhaps it is too narrow-minded to speak of state power, when corporations and even labour unions wield enormous influence. For Bonhoeffer and the new monasticism, the restored church will simply be where power is not. Restoration is political restoration. In one of his last letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer writes:

The Confessing Church has to a great extent forgotten all about the Barthian approach, and lapsed from positivism into *conservative restoration*. The important thing about that Church is that it carries on the great concepts of Christian theology, but that seems all it will do. There are, certainly, in these concepts the elements of genuine prophetic quality ... and of genuine worship, and to that extent the message of the Confessing Church meets only with attention, hearing and rejection. But they both remain unexplained and remote, because there is no interpretation in them.³²²

Against this kind of 'conservative restoration' is immediately contrasted the renewal efforts of the Berneuchen and Oxford movements who, in Bonhoeffer's opinion, skipped theological reflection in favour of personal change. 'He believed that the Oxford movement and its supporters lacked the strength of the preaching of the cross, and he criticised their indifference to the 'Confession' and their 'unsteadiness' that paralysed them with regard to church politics.'³²³

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, neither theology on its own (conservative restoration), nor politics on its own (activist restoration) is sufficient to effectively restore the church. A new monasticism – whether it is a *move* within or a *movement* without – restores the church when it incorporates a theology that is political (focused in the world) together with a politics that is theological (focused in Christ). Insofar as the established church – at home or in the West – is neither, the significance of the new monasticism will continue to grow.

³²² Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison*, 109. Italics mine.

³²³ Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 470.

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