

# Tillich and Bonhoeffer

## Exile and Death

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On 1st February 1933, two days after his election as *Reichskanzler*, Hitler published a proclamation in the *Völkischer Beobachter* in which he promised to take Christianity, 'the basis of our whole morality', under his 'firm protection'. This meant that the state religion would have to conform with and support National Socialist ideology. For some who rebelled against this it meant exile and for others death.

The universities were among the earliest of state institutions to be purged after the confirmation of Hitler as Chancellor of Germany and as early as April 1933 Bernhard Rust, the Prussian Minister for Cultural Affairs, had suspended the theologians Emil Fuchs, Professor at Kiel, Karl Ludwig Schmidt at Bonn and Paul Tillich at Frankfurt where he was Professor of Philosophy and Sociology, together with teachers of other subjects in other universities.

Tillich had lived a curious life in Germany up to that time. Having been an Army Chaplain in the 1914-18 war and having endured the battle at Verdun, he became firmly identified with the political fate of Germany after the war. He became a Religious Socialist and had a very reserved and equivocal association with the institutional church. Yet he managed to combine his socialism with an enthusiastic participation in the parties of upper class society, and he combined his Lutheran Christianity with a still more enthusiastic participation in a wide variety of sexual adventures. Despite his detestation of the thuggery of Nazi university students he was loath to leave Germany even after the accession of Hitler and his desire to return from New York in 1934 and be given a university job led him to produce a most compromising letter to Rust in which he appealed for employment in Germany. Part of this letter reads as follows:

I must protest my dismissal in so far as it is based on section 4, which includes a judgment of national unreliability. I do this especially in view of the fact that it is stated in the law itself that my temporary membership in the former Social Democratic Party is alone no reason for dismissal. Indeed there is no reason for assessing my scientific and political activities as nationally unreliable. On the contrary: in 1914, I volunteered

and then took part in almost all great battles of the west until 1918. I have received the Iron Cross First Class. Later, I became co-founder of German Religious Socialism, on the basis of my experience with soldiers and officers in the trenches and on first-aid posts. As the theoretician of Religious Socialism I have fought throughout the years the dogmatic Marxism of the German labour movement, and thereby I have supplied a number of concepts to the National Socialist theoreticians. Moreover, my last book was interpreted by the representatives of dogmatic Marxism as an attack upon them inasmuch as it points emphatically to the powers in man that bind him to nature. The fact that as a theologian I adopt the biblical criticism of an unbroken sway of national powers could be regarded as evidence of my national unreliability only if National Socialism had not identified itself with the programme of "positive Christianity". This, however, is the case. Hence I cannot, in this connection either, agree that national unreliability has in fact been demonstrated.

Tillich's claim that he had supplied some of the concepts of National Socialist theory mitigates his later boast that he had been the first non-Jewish university teacher to have been dismissed by the Nazis (he seems not to have actually been the first). In fairness to Tillich it can be said that the worst excesses of Nazism had not yet become fully apparent in January 1934, but it may well have been Tillich's ability to compromise himself that led Karl Barth to say of Tillich that he was 'an incomparably more bloodless and abstract thinker than Kutter or Ragaz', the other founders of Religious Socialism. This judgment is supported by Tillich's resignation from the Social Democratic Party on the advice of the Nazis, whereas Barth himself rejoined the Party and refused to leave it.

Once he had settled in the United States after the rejection of his appeal to be allowed to return to Germany, Tillich had to rebuild his career. Tillich's former reputation was scarcely known in America and his brand of theistic existentialism derived from Schelling was not congenial to a theological world attracted to the Social Gospel and the ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr. Tillich and his wife came to New York with little money and he was offered a job at Union Theological Seminary only because of the generosity of the other professors there who volunteered to take a cut in salary in order to employ him. It was in America that Tillich published the works which are the basis of his present reputation, and after the 1939-45 war he completed the three volumes of his *Systematic Theology* in each of the three academic centres that employed him in the United States: Union Theological Seminary, Harvard, and Chicago.

A new and much needed biography has been produced by Wilhelm and Marion Pauck; the first volume of Tillich's life has

now appeared, written largely by Marion Pauck, and a second volume on Tillich's thought will follow by her husband.<sup>1</sup> The provenance of the enterprise is impressive. Wilhelm Pauck has known Tillich since 1934, the biography was planned in 1962 and has been in preparation ever since. Tillich himself not only approved the project shortly before his death in 1965, but also helped the Paucks to get it started. This is the closest we have to an official biography of Tillich and it should sell well in the United States especially where Tillich is invariably hailed as the greatest English-speaking theologian, a claim which will not please many English and American theologians and which is an ambiguous compliment to Tillich himself as he was a German. This quasi-official biography may never be bettered, though there are enough problematical details to make one aware that it is not a complete and final work. In the first place, a life of Tillich which largely ignores his ideas, apart from a number of generalised statements, is a dubious proposition. A description of the end of his life with only passing reference to the ideas of his late works seems hardly more than a list of honours showered on the ageing Tillich. The eventual appearance of part two of this undertaking will prove whether it was wise to separate his life and thought. The intimate relationship between the Paucks and Tillich takes one into his character but protects him from extensive criticism. Anyone who really wants the lowdown on his sexual life must read Hannah Tillich's *From Time to Time* where Tillich's second wife hints at all even if she does not exactly reveal all. (It is diverting to look at the dedications of Tillich's books to guess whether he might have had a sexual liaison with any of the recipients.) We are, however, saved the whitewashing of Tillich's sexual character that Rollo May attempted a few years ago (*Paulus, Reminiscences of a Friendship*, London 1974). The memoirs of the embittered wives of great men may be sometimes unreliable but they offer unique insights. Consider, for example, the effectiveness of Alma Mahler's *Memories and Letters* about Gustav Mahler. Elsewhere Marion Pauck hints at incidents which are not explained in other parts of the book. On p.263, for example, Tillich is said to have patched up his quarrel with Karl Barth but we are not told what the quarrel had been about. We are told of the help that Tillich gave Thomas Mann on a section of *Doctor Faustus*, but it is not clear how extensive was his relationship with Mann and other German emigrés.

Tillich died twelve years ago at the age of 79 with his reputation at its height. His ashes were buried in the Paul Tillich Park, New Harmony, Indiana, with its specially designed but never completed Cave of the New Being. Tillich seems to have shown no

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life and Thought, Vol 1 Life*, Collins, London 1977, pp. xii + 340. £5.95.

embarrassment at having this park named after him, on the contrary it seems to have satisfied his innate need to be known as widely as possible. Still, Paul Tillich should be glad that he was buried in his park. After Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been hanged, his body was burnt in the ovens of Flossenbürg extermination camp.

Bonhoeffer was born twenty years after Tillich and had he not been executed by the Nazis he would now be 71 years old, perhaps having recently retired from a chair in some famous German university so that he could complete his final testament—maybe his own *Systematic Theology*. But this was not to be. The wave of dismissals initiated by Rust in 1933 did not touch Bonhoeffer as it did Tillich. Tillich was a well established university teacher, had been for a while in the Social Democratic Party and was known as a Religious Socialist. Bonhoeffer at this stage was uninterested in politics and was a teacher of no great status in Berlin. His one attempt to stick his neck out had been his radio talk on 1st March 1933 in which he attacked the concept of a secular Führer and which was faded out before completion by some Nazi gremlin in the broadcasting studio. This talk was essentially a protest on behalf of the Church and Christianity rather than German society as a whole. As the struggle for power within the Lutheran Church developed Bonhoeffer felt the need to distance himself from the Nazi regime at this time and for two years between 1933 and 1935 he became a Pastor at Forest Hill, London. It was during this period that he extended his activities in the ecumenical movement by making many contacts in various countries, including Sweden and Switzerland which were to remain neutral in the coming war, and it was this that enabled Bonhoeffer to become a courier at a later stage in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler.

Bonhoeffer's initial lack of political interest did not stifle his prescience. As soon as Hitler became Chancellor, Bonhoeffer knew that it would mean war (just as, amid the victories of 1942, he amazed his friends by predicting Germany's defeat the moment Russia was attacked) but he was wrong in believing that the German people would ensure that Hitler's rule would be a short one. Bonhoeffer's opposition to Hitler and National Socialism was an attempt to keep the Church free from state interference, especially at the introduction of the Aryan Clauses by which Jewish converts to Christianity were prevented from becoming or remaining ministers in the Church. This was because of the suspension of all Jewish civil servants which included salaried ministers of religion. A split immediately took place in the Lutheran Church in which the German Christians in the Reich Church under the leadership of Bishop Ludwig Müller gave a religious blessing to the Nazi state, while the smaller but vociferous Confessing Church tried to preserve the integrity of Protestant Christianity. After his return from

London, Bonhoeffer took charge of a small and illegal seminary in a country house at Finkelwalde near the Baltic coast where he prepared a number of young men for the ministry of the Confessing Church. The Confessing Church was soon repressed, its ministers did not receive a state salary and they were not exempt from conscription. This latter fact created grave difficulties for those who had been influenced by Bonhoeffer's pacifism as Germans who objected to fighting for the Reich were sent to concentration camps or were shot. Some of the students at Finkelwalde were arrested by the Gestapo, many were killed on the Russian front.

In the summer of 1939 Bonhoeffer lectured in the United States and had the general intention of staying there to avoid conscription. But by the end of July he was back in Berlin, compelled to share the fate of Germany. A month later war broke out. With the seminary of Finkelwalde having been closed by the S.S., Bonhoeffer was given a deliberately vague job doing intelligence work for the *Abwehr* which preserved him from actual fighting. In fact he was given the job so that he could act as courier in the vain attempt to organise a conspiracy which would remove not only Hitler but the whole Nazi régime so that Germany could sue for peace. Bonhoeffer's task was to inform the allies of the possibility of Hitler's overthrow and to ascertain what surrender terms would be accepted. This conspiracy might have worked but was repeatedly frustrated as generals who were prepared to work for the removal of Hitler were sacked by earning their Führer's displeasure. After two attempts to kill Hitler in March 1943, Bonhoeffer and other suspects were arrested by the Gestapo and he was incarcerated in the military prison at Tegel in Berlin. He still hoped for Hitler's removal until the final tragedy of 20 July 1944 when von Stauffenberg exploded a bomb in Hitler's presence but without killing him. That was the end of the conspiracy and any German attempt to destroy the Nazi régime and end the war. Bonhoeffer himself withstood interrogation—he was never tortured like some of the others—until the discoveries of the diaries of Admiral Canaris in March 1945. These diaries documented the history of the conspiracy. They were shown to Hitler who ordered the immediate court martial and execution of all those who were implicated. Bonhoeffer was transferred to Buchenwald and then to Flossenbürg in Bavaria where he was killed on 9th April. The camp doctor said that 'In almost fifty years that I have worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God'.

Eberhard Bethge, a student of Bonhoeffer's at Finkelwalde and the recipient of many of his letters from prison, has made it his life work to edit and publish Bonhoeffer's theological legacy. His monumental and unsurpassable biography of Bonhoeffer has now become available as a paperback, seven years after its origin-

al English publication.<sup>2</sup> It is a very academic biography and its very completeness makes it frankly boring in places. But everything about Bonhoeffer's life is there and no one can complain of superficiality on the author's part. There may be a case for producing an abridged version at a quarter of its present length so that those who do not want to read about Bonhoeffer's attendance at ecumenical conferences in Ciernohorské Kúpeke and other such places in 1932 need not do so. Bethge has worked together a description of Bonhoeffer's life with an account of his main theological ideas, including a lengthy if rather unimaginative analysis of the chief themes in his last letters: "world come of age", "religionless Christianity" and "arcane discipline". Although Christianity has changed considerably over the last 30 years Bonhoeffer's ideas have by no means been assimilated by Christianity and its institutions. Consider what might be the consequences of a religionless form of Catholicism; a Catholicism which had a theology not based on individual salvation, a God who refused to intervene in the world as a *Deus ex machina*, a faith which did not include any form of self-justification based on moral law, and a laity who had come of age and did not need either a God who is a moral tutor or a Church which is a spiritual guardian. There are still so many vestiges of religion in Catholic Christianity: recent Vatican condemnations of some types of sexual behaviour based on a mistaken (and unThomistic) understanding of natural law; sympathisers of Archbishop Lefebvre who want to restore mystery into the liturgy; Bishops who are afraid that services of penance and reconciliation are making God's forgiveness too easy (it is not *easy*; it is free, unmerited, unearned and always available). All this is religion in Bonhoeffer's sense. We still need to read Bonhoeffer to discover that Christianity can be true to the gospel only with the abandonment of religion.

Hitler's Third Reich fragmented German theological activity between 1933 and 1945. Paul Althaus went over to the German Christians and was thoroughly discredited. Karl Barth was eventually dismissed from his post at Bonn and returned to his native Switzerland, where even in Basel he remained an inspiration for Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church. Tillich went into exile in the United States. Bonhoeffer went to his death in Germany. Of the major figures in German theology at that time whose reputation has survived into the post-war period only Rudolf Bultmann seems to have continued, demythologizing away at Marburg University and sending shock waves through the Church after the war. But how much more shocking is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's indistinct but incisive vision of a Christianity without religion.

<sup>2</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*, translated by Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke and William Glen-Doepel, edited by Edwin Robertson, Collins, London 1977, pp. xx + 867. £3.00.