



# “To ask essential questions?”

## Bonhoeffer, America, South Africa

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### Abstract

The first part of the essay is a biographical sketch of Bonhoeffer’s visits to America. His essays reflecting on these visits will be probed in the second part, where the focus will particularly be on the essay that Bonhoeffer wrote at the end of his second visit: *Essay about Protestantism in the United States of America* (1939). In the third part the question as to what mirrors Bonhoeffer preferred to reflect on the church in America will be asked, investigating critically how the mirrors he preferred influenced his reflections. In this light the question as to the mirrors Bonhoeffer preferred in reference to America will be made use of to reflect on the church in South Africa. This final part of the essay is therefore not a reflection on the church in South Africa with Bonhoeffer’s mirrors, as if his mirrors are the mirrors for churches to look into. It is rather a reflection on the hermeneutic presuppositions and the implications thereof as questioning mirrors churches are to look into. The essay in this manner presumes to give hermeneutical impulses for churches looking into mirrors.

**Keywords:** Bonhoeffer, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, Protestantism, South Africa.

*To ask essential questions of the other church opens up unknown riches for one’s own church* (DBW 15:446).

### Introduction

The apt metaphor of the mirror has often been used with regards to the church, also in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor goes back to the biblical traditions, where it is made use of in the most diverse ways.

It is interesting, however, that in these traditions mirror-metaphors do not merely philosophically reflect whoever is in front of the mirror. These mirrors do not merely serve as mirror images of who those in front of it are. It rather also serves as a metaphor reflecting our inability to really see, to not know fully, to know only in part.<sup>2</sup> In addition, and despite the inability, it serves as a metaphor for the important exercise of looking into mirrors, of reflecting, of not merely disregarding both looking into mirrors altogether, or looking into mirrors too quickly, thus disregarding what the mirror has revealed, what we have come to see.<sup>3</sup> We are

<sup>1</sup> In the Dutch Reformed Church, for example, *Kerkspieël* has since 1981 been doing sociological-demographical research which functions as a “mirror” for Dutch Reformed churches.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know *in part*; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:14).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. James who critically refers to the act of “listening to the word” as the mirror in which one looks, but then after looking leaving the mirror, “immediately forgetting what (one) looks like” (Jas. 1:23).



rather to constantly look into the mirror – as these mirrors allow us to really see what we aren't, or rather, what we are to be.<sup>4</sup>

It is in reference to these biblical traditions' listing the ways of knowing that Kees van der Kooi in *As in a mirror* refers to the fact that we *still* see in a mirror. Also for him, the texts refers to restrictions and limitations. The mirror, or rather, the reflection in the mirror is a form of *indirect* knowledge, it reflects merely *our* reflection and is therefore dim and subject to deformations (Van der Kooi, 2005).

The mirror, he argues, already in the biblical traditions also refers to the *broader* field of *symbolic* possibilities. The mirror, for example, is a metaphor *for knowledge*, the mirror makes known (Van der Kooi, 2005). For him it therefore is important to realise that the mirror in the texts refers to indirect knowledge *of God*, it is restricted and limited knowing *of God* (Van der Kooi, 2005).

Many theologians finding themselves in what has become known as the Reformed tradition<sup>5</sup> have found these references to the mirror as metaphor for knowledge of God to be particularly resourceful. This, for example, was already true of John Calvin, for whom the knowledge of God was not to be confined to a mirror.<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely for this reason that it is not only important for the church to constantly look into mirrors, but *to ask questions* about the mirrors we look into.<sup>7</sup>

It thus is a question of how the mirrors we prefer reflect who we are or aren't in light of the knowledge of God; how the mirrors we prefer reflect merely what we want to see; how we refrain from looking into mirrors reflecting what we do not want to see, mirrors often truer to the knowledge of God, knowingly or not; in short, how different mirrors will lead to different *reflections*.

In the following essay the hermeneutic questions inherent in the mirror-metaphor will be asked with regards to Bonhoeffer's reflections on the church in America. These questions will then also be critically asked regarding the church in South Africa.

The first part of the essay is a biographical sketch of Bonhoeffer's visits to America. His essays reflecting on these visits will be probed in the second part, where the focus will particularly be on the essay that Bonhoeffer wrote at the end of his second visit: *Essay about Protestantism in the United States of America* (1939). In the third part the question as to what mirrors Bonhoeffer preferred to reflect on the church in America will be asked, investigating critically how the mirrors he preferred influenced his reflections. In this light the *question* as to the mirrors Bonhoeffer preferred in reference to America will be made use of to reflect on the church in South Africa. This final part of the essay is therefore not a reflection on the church in South Africa with Bonhoeffer's mirrors, as if his mirrors are *the* mirrors for churches to look

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being *transformed into* his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. the way Barth found the mirror metaphor to be relevant in van der Kooi (2005:251-416).

<sup>6</sup> For perspectives on Calvin's notion of the mirror cf. Keesecker (1960) who argued that "John Calvin looked into the mirror of the creation, the Word, and the Word made flesh and beheld the splendour of the invisible God" (289). The mirror-metaphor, for Calvin, "manages to crystallize several constitutive elements of a religious epistemology which seemingly cannot be articulated in a satisfactory manner without having recourse to it" (Kayayan 1996:419). Cf. in this regard also van der Kooi (2005:21-250). Calvin's mirror metaphor is, however, not confined to his *Institutes*. Cf. e.g. Robert Vosloo, who recently argued that Calvin links the metaphor of a mirror reflecting the knowledge of God also to the stranger. "We see our own face as in a mirror", he reiterates in reference to Calvin, "in the furthest stranger in the world" (2016:40).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. in this regard Smit (1994, 2014), who in light of James' reference to the mirror-metaphor critically refers to the importance of asking what we see in the mirror. For the relation between James and Paul's references to the metaphor and the Bible cf. Smit (2006:234-237).



into. It is rather a reflection on the hermeneutic presuppositions and the implications thereof as questioning mirrors churches are to look into.

The essay in this manner presumes to give hermeneutical impulses for churches looking into mirrors.

### Bonhoeffer in America?

Bonhoeffer visited America at the end of 1930 to July 1931,<sup>8</sup> and also in 1939, from June to July.<sup>9</sup>

In 1930 Bonhoeffer received a letter of invitation from Henry Sloan Coffin, the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, which was known for its liberal Protestant theology. The invitation was to apply for a post-doctoral fellowship. Bonhoeffer, at this stage, already finished two dissertations, *Sanctorum Communion* (published in 1930) and his habilitation thesis, *Act and Being* (published in 1931), and although he was hired as a teaching assistant, he was thinking of leaving Germany again. Bonhoeffer therefore replied positively to the invitation and was accepted at Union with the Sloane fellowship. On September 6, 1930, after completing the many requirements at Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, he boarded for America and arrived in New York nine days later.

In *Strange Glory* (2015), Bonhoeffer's American visits are described in detail by Charles Marsh. His particular focus on Franklin Fischer, an intern at Abyssinian Baptist Church, and Bonhoeffer's immersion also in American black Christianity is particularly noteworthy. Bonhoeffer procured detailed insight into the realities of Harlem, signing up to explore the neighbourhood under the seminary's program called *Trip to Negro Centres of Life and Culture in Harlem*, and plunged into African American literature. In fact, he compiled an extensive bibliography on *the Negro* (sic) through the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library and collected articles on the race issue. Although he attended the most varied churches and denominations, often during the afternoon as well, Bonhoeffer committed himself to the black neighbourhood district of Harlem, which wasn't far from Union.

Bonhoeffer, however, was in no way confined to New York. The vast land lured him not only to Washington DC (with Fischer), but to cross the United States to Cuba (with Sutz) and Mexico (with Lasserre).

This does not mean that Bonhoeffer neglected the real purpose of his visit – studying at Union Theological Seminary. Union at that time was as interdenominational seminary a focal point for the most progressive liberal minds, argues Marsh. In fact, Bonhoeffer's detailed report reveals the extent to which he used this period for critical exploration. He tested himself in the fields he had at that stage not yet explored.

The list of courses and lectures Bonhoeffer took during the year included "religion and Ethics" (Niebuhr); "Religious Aspects of Contemporary Philosophy" (Lyman); "Church and Community: The cooperation of the Church with Social and Character-Building Agencies" (Webber); "Ethical Interpretation" (Ward and Niebuhr); "Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature" (Ward and Niebuhr); "Ethical Issues in the Social Order" (Ward); "Theology I: The Idea of God in his Relations to the World and Man" (Baillie); "Seminar in Philosophical Theology" (Baillie and Lyman); "Brief Sermons" (Fosdick); "The Minister's Work with Individuals" (Coffin). In the latter part of the year, when he was able to study more intensively, Bonhoeffer particularly began to focus on American philosophy (which he took with Lyman).

<sup>8</sup> For his letters and essays during this period at Union Theological Seminary, cf. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 10* (2008:241-304; 411-478). For his reports on the year at Union, cf. Bonhoeffer (2008:305-324). For his sermons, cf. Bonhoeffer (2008:580-590).

<sup>9</sup> For his letters during this period at Union Theological Seminary, cf. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 15* (2011:177-216; 245-248). For his diary entries, cf. Bonhoeffer (2011:217-244). For his sermons, cf. Bonhoeffer (2008:580-590). Cf. also Tietz (2016: 19-24, 77-80).



He also focused on the “ethical interpretation of recent events”, which he found to be so important for those studying at Union, and “on modern literature and the social ethics” (with Ward and Webber).

In many ways, New York made a deep impression on Bonhoeffer. Marsh argues that Bonhoeffer’s transformation in the course of the year from the oft mentioned phraseological to the real would always be linked to what he saw while at Union. The American year set his entire thinking on a track from which it didn’t deviate in the years to come. Bonhoeffer himself would in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* recall that it was in this year that he was moulded more than ever.

Bonhoeffer visited America again in 1939.

This time the departure wasn’t plain sailing. In fact, he was plagued from the very beginning of the journey. There were many reasons for this. The *Sammelvikariate* was still without a director and he wasn’t able to leave his duties as he would have wanted it. In addition, the church struggle had intensified just when he was leaving.

This was also the case with his arrival. In fact, argues Eberhard Bethge in his *Biography* (2000), his arrival in New York intensified his own plaguing struggle. This was due to many misunderstandings on many sides – both Bonhoeffer and those who invited him were due to numerous reasons not sure what would be required of him.

Despite these misunderstandings, however, it became quite clear for Bonhoeffer that he would have to return to Germany. The inactivity, or rather activity in things that aren’t important, he wrote, was for him quite intolerable. Despite the many requests asking him not to return, he made up his mind and left America on 8 July, less than a mere month after his arrival.

Despite the brevity of his visit and the decision to return, Bonhoeffer had new concentration to reflect on America. In fact, he perhaps learned more during this month than in the whole year nine years ago, he later wrote. He spent the few days he had to read an amazing amount of material, including, interestingly, a series of essays published in the *Christian Century*, “How my mind has changed”.

### **Bonhoeffer’s America?**

Although Bonhoeffer’s reflections remained critical during his second visit to America, it was more nuanced than the harsh critique of his first visit. This is particularly clear in his reflecting essay, “Essay about Protestantism in the United States of America”, also known as “Protestantism without Reformation” (1939).

Bonhoeffer begins this essay by stating that there are at least two restrictions when reflecting on a foreign church (DBWE 15:438).

The first is that the reflector “has the tendency to attribute the strangeness of another church to the peculiarities of its geographical, national, and social location, that is, to understand it in terms of its historical, political, and sociological context” (DBWE 15:438).

For Bonhoeffer, such a detached reflection is: “common since there is a greater interest in the historical peculiarities of Christianity than in its truth”; “boring because it leads to a dead and convenient schematization”, and “false because it dissolves from the outset the mutual obligation that churches have for each other’s proclamation and doctrine” (DBWE 15:438). Even though such a reflection indeed leads to “aesthetic joy in the variety of appearances” and to an acceptance that as such is “a complement to one’s own church”, it is impossible to really mirror the church that is reflected upon, to relate to the church in such a manner that it leads to the taking up of responsibility (DBWE 15:439).



For Bonhoeffer, a reflection rather has to ask “what God does to and with his church, in and with America”. It rather has to ask “how God reveals himself (sic) to the church and whether and how we may recognise God in that church” (DBWE 15:439).

It thus becomes a question of God in *our* midst. To reflect on a church cannot be done on the basis of the characteristics of *other* peoples. This is the case as both in America and “among us” it is about the church of Jesus Christ. There thus is something more to the church, and this more is Jesus Christ (DBWE 15:439).

The second is that the reflector “all too easily (is) content with the current picture of that church’s situation”. This is the case not only as “one can easily forget how important it is to take the history of the foreign church seriously”, but because what God does to and with his church is not to be loosened from what God *has* been doing in and with his church. What God is doing at least to some degree reflects what God has been doing *throughout the centuries* (DBWE 15:439).

In his reflection he thus asks *what God is doing* “to and with his church in America”, what is God doing “through his church to us and, through us, to it”? (DBWE 15:439). He then attempts to answer these questions with regards to an analytical reflection on the church in America.

For Bonhoeffer, American denominations, firstly, have not been able to realise the *visible unity* of God’s church. In fact, they have “no central organization, no common confession, no common ritual practises, no common church history, no common ethical, social, or political principles”. Instead, they have a variety of Christian forms. For him, this variety includes the “segregation of the races” which repeats itself even within the churches and is variously determined by sociality (DBWE 15:440).

Where the church *is* visibly one or at least attempts to act in unity, it is not a reflection of *the* church of Jesus Christ, but rather reflections of the *churches*. In fact, instead of referring to the diversity of *churches*, the American churches refer to *denominations*, which isn’t linked to “clericalism, autocracy, confessional conceit, intolerance, persecution of heresies, a desire for worldly power and political favours” (DBWE 15:440).

Although what is meant by denomination is not too clearly defined, it is manifest for him that it is not a *theological* concept. It rather refers to “historical, political, and social conditions” (DBWE 15:441). To be a denomination merely means that those related to the denomination share whatever has been found to be similarities, which necessarily distinguishes them from those with different shared similarities.

For Bonhoeffer, the fact that American denominations aren’t determined by a confession is of formidable importance. Wherever a denomination would claim to be determined by a confession, it would be limited denominationally by those not determined by this confession. The differences in what is confessed are more important *within* denominations, which for him means that the relationship between different denominations aren’t constituted by a quest for what is to be confessed (DBWE 15:442).

It is precisely this lack in a quest for what is to be confessed, this lack in a quest for a criterion that for Bonhoeffer leads to the divisions of and within the church. “Precisely where the struggle for a true confession is *not* decisive”, he says, “the unity of the church is further away than where the confession alone unites and divides the churches” (DBWE 15:442).

He answers the question of why this is the case by differentiating between the churches of the Reformation’s presupposition of the *unity* of the church of Christ and the denominations’ unimaginable *diversity*.

For Bonhoeffer, or at least from his perspective of the churches of the Reformation, there can be only one church, and this church alone is the true church constituted by Jesus Christ. The presupposition here is the unity of the church. The church divided is a church divided against the true church of Christ. Therefore he describes the quest of the Reformation as the quest for the one, universal, holy church of Jesus Christ (DBWE 15:442).



The churches of America, with their presupposition of the diversity of the churches, rather would not dare make the claim to be the *one church*. It is precisely because they have not been part of the division itself, but merely the consequences of the church divisions, that they are not in the first place concerned with the struggle for the one church.<sup>10</sup> For them, Bonhoeffer emphasises, the unity of the church of Jesus Christ is not so much something presupposed as it is “something that is demanded and should be” (DBWE 15:443).

For Bonhoeffer, the denominations confront the churches of the Reformation with the question of the multiplicity of churches. The churches of the Reformation, which Bonhoeffer here refers to as “the church of Jesus Christ”, confronts the denominations in America with the question of the unity of the church (DBWE 15:444).

How are we to think about the unity and the divisions of the church? What constitutes the true or a false church? Is there a true church, a “measure by which all others can and must be measured” (DBWE 15:444).

It is clear that for Bonhoeffer the unity of the church is to be both the presupposition and the demand of what should be. Where the presupposed unity of the church is neglected, the quest for unity takes the place of the unity of Jesus Christ. Where the demand for unity is neglected, the quest is replaced with what he refers to as a separatist “*pharisaic claim*” (DBWE 15:445, my italics).

For Bonhoeffer, this does not mean that there is a method towards the unity of the church. A method for church unity is not possible because the different churches is founded on different hermeneutical frameworks. He finds the “ask(ing) of essential questions of the other church”, however, to “open up unknown richness for one’s own church” (DBWE 15:446, my italics).

American denominations, secondly, have not been able to realise a struggle *for truth*.

He understands, on the one hand, why America wants to be a country of Protestantism in its full denominational breath. It is their faithfulness towards their own history that led to this situation in the church. The church of Jesus Christ in America was from the beginning a “place of refuge for persecuted Christians”, an “asylum for the victims of religious intolerance” (DBWE 15:446). It is precisely for this reason, having found a refuge in America, that they have rightly concluded that in a country of refuge all intolerance is un-Christian (DBWE 15:448). In such a country of refugees, tolerance is founded not by a confessional struggle as such but rather by a consideration for the victims of such a struggle (DBWE 15:448). On the other hand, Bonhoeffer sees a danger in the fact that future generations will see a confessional struggle, a decision for truth, a striving for the question for truth as something that in itself is not Christian, thus relativizing the truth (DBWE 15:448).

It is particularly interesting that Bonhoeffer treats these important themes under a different heading – that he deliberately did not make these themes part of the section where he asks about American denominations and the foundations of their unity. He hereby emphasizes the danger that they might become stranded in the present, that their inability to deal with and remember their respective histories might lead them to misunderstand their situation (DBWE 15:448).

Thirdly, the denominations in America have not been able to realise *real freedom*. For Bonhoeffer, the American church, the church in the America that refers to itself as the land of freedom (DBWE 15:448), in reality is “a church in chains”. This is true even if it thinks itself to be free (DBWE 15:448). He criticises the American church’s freedom as a freedom in independence, as being a church merely without interference.

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<sup>10</sup> This is the case as America “was from the beginning a place of refuge for the persecuted Christians” (DBWE 15:446). “Here”, he reiterates, “is gathered Protestants of all confessions who have already renounced” the concern with a confession over against other confessions (DBWE 15:447).



For Bonhoeffer, this freedom, seen as the possibility of the church, isn't freedom at all. The freedom of the church, he argues, is not where it has possibilities (DBWE 15:448). The freedom of the church is a freedom where the word of God is proclaimed, that is, where what is proclaimed is actual even and when there are no such possibilities for the church.

Freedom is the freedom of God, the freedom where a "must" compels it. Freedom, thus, is not what is allowed to the church. Where the church is merely allowed possibility, that is, when what is to be proclaimed is proclaimed only when the church is allowed the possibility, it is not free (DBWE 15:449).

In contrast to this freedom as possibility, the freedom of the church is freedom as "a reality, as urgency, as factual event". This freedom, thus, is to be distinguished from possibility. It is only when the word of God is actually proclaimed that the American churches are really free (DBWE 15:449).

The relation between the *church and the state* have, fourthly, not been realised by American denominations. Bonhoeffer discusses this relation in detail.

Despite the separation of church and state in America, the church in a significant way participates in the different publics of the state (DBWE 15:450). For Bonhoeffer, there is a uniqueness in the American separation of church and state.

Bonhoeffer finds this uniqueness in the fact that the religionlessness of the state is not so much because of the state being set over against the churches. The religionlessness of the state is rather due to the churches being set over against the state (DBWE 15:450). This is the case, according to Bonhoeffer, as American democracy is founded not on humanitarian principles, but on principles of the kingdom, that is, the limitation of the state. For American churches, influenced as it is by Puritanism's highlighting this limitation, and Spiritualism highlighting the kingdom being built not by the state but solely by the church of Jesus Christ – the church has clear priority before the state (DBWE 15:451).

Bonhoeffer then describes the difference between the American- and Reformation churches' church-state relations. The fundamental difference is that the churches of the Reformation base the relation between church and state on the doctrine of the two kingdoms, where both the church and the state in different ways do what God wants it to do, separately. This is not the case in America, where the state do what it does because of the church.

For Bonhoeffer, however, this means that the basic prolegomena of the separation of church and state, in this way, is lost (DBWE 15:452). Where he links the secularization of Europe to a lack in terms of their theology of the two kingdoms or at least their understanding thereof, he links American secularization to the lack of a separation of church and state (DBWE 15:453). For him, it is precisely this *juncture* between the church and the state that leads to strife between the two spheres in America.

Bonhoeffer's point becomes particularly clear in his reference to the considerable power of the free Christian associations that are not denominationally connected. It is these associations that have the most powerful influence of the church on the state (DBWE 15:455). It is precisely this fact, according to Bonhoeffer, that allows for a particularly clear picture not only of American Christendom, but of the problems caused by the lacking development and distinction between the two kingdoms. Christians, for Bonhoeffer, therefore have to rethink and reconsider the theology of the two kingdoms (DBWE 15:456).

American denominations, fifthly, have not been able to attend to the *racial issue*. The separation between those following the "black" and "white" Christs distinctively reflects the separation *within* the church of Jesus Christ (DBWE 15:456). The picture of the church in America is still colored by these distinctions (DBWE 15:457).

It is, however, in these churches that Bonhoeffer have found the gospel of Jesus Christ to be *truly* proclaimed and received. In fact, the race issue is one of the most decisive future tasks for the white churches. This is the case as it is in these churches that, despite the white



Christians that do whatever they can to improve relations between those distinguished by color, black Christians are still discriminated against (DBWE 15:458).

American denominations, and this is his last point, have not been able to really attend to *theology*. Although American theology is significant, for Bonhoeffer, American denominations must be understood primarily in terms not of theology, but their “church services, their practical work in the congregation, and their public engagement” (DBWE 15:460). What is important here is not Bonhoeffer’s paternalistic opinion on American theology, but what he describes as the “irreconcilable contrast between the churches of the Reformation and ‘Protestantism without Reformation’” (DBWE 15:460).

Where in 1931 he found the theological spirit at Union Theological Seminary to further the process of the secularization of Christianity in America (DBWE 10:309), he in 1939 found in theology a return from secularism in its many forms (DBWE 15:461). Where he found a predominant interest in the social gospel, a gospel that influenced his own theology deeply, there now was a renewed interest in *doctrine* (DBWE 15:461).

While clearly recognising the framework of a “new search for a Christian theology of revelation”, Bonhoeffer in 1939 still found in American theology “a fairly uniform picture” (DBWE 15:461). For him, it is the failure in Christology that was characteristic of all American theology. It is the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ, he reiterated, that lacked (DBWE 15:462). In short, for Bonhoeffer, “God did not grant a Reformation to American Christendom”. In spite of many theologians and their particular theologies, there was “no reformation of the church of Jesus Christ from the word of God” (DBWE 15:463). It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer describes the decisive task today as the conversation between the Reformed churches and the churches without reformation.

### **America in Bonhoeffer’s reflection?**

In this light, it is possible to ask what mirrors underlie Bonhoeffer’s reflection on American churches. How did the mirrors he utilized influence his reflections on the churches in America?

Bonhoeffer, in the first place, uses the mirror of *the question of the Word*. How God is revealed to the church and whether and how God is being recognised in the church really is a question of God’s Word. Instead of philosophical-methodological demands merely derived from theological insights, Bonhoeffer retrieves the mirror of the Word. “Only the truth revealed in the Bible”, he states, “can and must decide”. In fact, churches are to be questioned by other churches “on the basis of the Bible” (DBWE 15:443, my italics). This is the case as, for him, the truth of the word of God is a matter of life and death (DBWE 15:444). It is precisely because a common level of understanding between churches seems to be missing, that it becomes “easier to envision the only level on which Christians can encounter one another, the Bible” (DBWE 15:446, my italics).

In terms of American theology, Bonhoeffer finds American churches to not fully understand “what ‘critique’ by God’s word means in its entirety”. What the churches in America do not understand, according to him, is that this critique is precisely also meant for religion. It is for this reason that Bonhoeffer can describe American Christendom as “essentially still religion” (DBWE 15:446).

In the second place, he retrieves the mirror of *the question of Jesus Christ*. In fact, reflecting on a church in America is reflecting on “how God reveals himself to the church” (DBWE 15:439). For Bonhoeffer, Jesus Christ is the basis from which to reflect (DBWE 15:445).

In American theology – and this is particularly clear in his reflection – the person and work of Jesus Christ recedes into the background. In fact, it remains ultimately not understood because the radical characteristics of God is misunderstood (DBWE 15:464).



Bonhoeffer, in the third place, utilizes the mirror of *the question of history*. How does the history the church seems to find to be of importance impact on the church today? For Bonhoeffer, what God did to and with the church in his own country was more urgent, clear, and public in and during the Reformation than in any other subsequent period. It is precisely for this reason that he criticizes the church of his own country as they at the turn of the century did not really reflect the church of the Reformation (DBWE 15:439).

In terms of America's church history Bonhoeffer recalls the beginning of the Congregationalists in New England, the Baptists in Rhode Island, or the revival movement led by Jonathan Edwards. American Christianity, he highlights, "is also and especially what happened in those days" (DBWE 15:439).

In the fourth place, Bonhoeffer retrieves the mirror of *the question of Harlem*.

Already in his reports on his first visit to America, he highlights the influence of Harlem and the question of *the other* on him. In fact, in his second report on the mentioned visit, he describes his weekly contact with Harlem as "one of the most important experiences in America". It is here that he came to know America quite intensively. In fact, it is here that he got "to see something of the real face of America". The real face, which he found to be deeply distressing, was "hidden behind the veil of words in the American constitution", where all were said to be equal (DBWE 10:321).

Marsh states that it is this question of the other that "unquestionably turned Bonhoeffer outward and upward" (Marsh, 2015:119).

This is also the argument of Reggie Williams (McCormick Theological Seminary), who in *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (2014a) argued that Bonhoeffer's question of the other developed from his year of study in New York City when "he encountered the black Christ who suffered with African Americans" (Williams, 2014a:1).<sup>11</sup> It was these insights that "inspired his efforts in Germany to uncouple the false connection between white imperialist identity and Jesus and its tragic imprint for Christianity" (Williams, 2014a:3).

Bonhoeffer, in the fifth place uses the mirror of *the question of the two kingdoms*.

Bonhoeffer has been influenced by the most diverse intellectuals. In *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation* (2008), Augustine, Aquinas, à Kempis, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Dilthey, Nietzsche, von Harnack, Bultmann, Tillich, Barth<sup>12</sup>, Niebuhr and Heidegger are examples of those who influenced him.

It is, however, particularly the theology of Luther that influenced Bonhoeffer's mirror reflections on America. In his recent *Bonhoeffer's reception of Luther* (2017), Michael DeJonge argues that Bonhoeffer was in conversation with Luther's thought from the beginning to the end of his career (DeJonge, 2017:1). For him, it is precisely Bonhoeffer's reception of Luther's theology of two kingdoms that is of primary importance and "demonstrates the enduring two kingdoms character of Bonhoeffer's thinking" (DeJonge 2017:78).

DeJonge finds the many previous investigations of Bonhoeffer's reception of Luther's two kingdoms thought to not also have adequately inspected what Luther himself had to say about his two kingdoms. These inquiries either lacked sympathetic engagement with that tradition of thought or Bonhoeffer's understanding of it (DeJonge 2017:77).<sup>13</sup> DeJonge thus, after a

<sup>11</sup> Cf. also his essay on developing a *Theologia Crucis* (2014b).

<sup>12</sup> For more detailed discussion on Barth's influence on Bonhoeffer, cf. Marsh (1994), Pangritz (2000) and more recently DeJonge (2012).

<sup>13</sup> DeJonge refers to the work of Clifford Green (1999), Larry Rasmussen (2005), and Stanley Hauerwas (2015), who, despite in many ways having "divergent interpretations of Bonhoeffer", nonetheless "all assert that Bonhoeffer affirms two-kingdoms thinking early in his career but comes to abandon it at some later point" (2017:77).



detailed analysis of Luther's two kingdoms thought, provides a detailed inquiry of Bonhoeffer's reception thereof in three phases.

Bonhoeffer's discussed essay on Protestantism is embedded in the beginning of DeJonge's third phase. Here Bonhoeffer finds the doctrine of the two kingdoms to be "ordered by God to remain until the end of the world, each serving in a fundamentally different way" (DBWE 15: 452). His point in terms of the two kingdoms doctrine is made particularly clear: "While the churches of the Reformation need a new examination and correction of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the American denominations must learn the necessity of this distinction today if they are to escape complete secularization". The church, he reiterates, even when a church is independent of the state, is not exempted from the threat of infringement from the world (DBWE 15:453).

### **South Africa in Bonhoeffer's reflection?**

In this light the question of the mirrors Bonhoeffer used in terms of his critical remarks regarding America can also be used in terms of Protestant churches, or at least churches of the reformation, in South Africa. It is not a question of reflecting on the church in South Africa with whatever Bonhoeffer found reflected in his mirrors, it is also – as has already been mentioned – not a question of reflecting on Bonhoeffer's mirrors, as if his mirrors are *the* mirrors for churches. It is rather a reflection on the hermeneutic presuppositions and the implications thereof as questioning mirrors for churches are to look into.

Bonhoeffer's reflections, firstly, put the churches in South Africa in front of *the mirror of the questioning Word*.

In his Christology lectures, or the student notes of these lectures, Bonhoeffer distinguishes the Word of God, "the living Word to humankind", from the human word, which is "word in the form of an idea". With the word as idea he means that it is directly accessible by any person at any time. It is possible to take possession of the word as idea. This word, therefore, cannot be applied to Jesus Christ, precisely because the "idea of God" that is embodied in Christ is not accessible by any person at any time (DBWE 12:316).

In contrast to this word as an idea that "remains essentially within itself" is the Word actually "spoken to us", the living Word "in the form of address". It takes place in time and space, "it is a one-time event" in history, it "happens there where it is spoken to someone by another". Bonhoeffer thus highlights the freedom of God as the one who speaks, as the one who decides what is said, and when. This Word is "a new event every time", and is to be contrasted by Jesus Christ as idea-word, as "timeless truth" not able to actually speak to us anew. As living Word, Jesus Christ is "breaking into a concrete moment, as God's speaking to us". It is thus God who in Jesus Christ allows himself to be heard, not human beings, "it is entirely within his freedom to reveal himself to me or to hide himself from me" (DBWE 12:316).

It is *this* questioning mirror that is important for churches in South Africa.

Secondly, his reflections place the churches in South Africa in front of *the mirror of Jesus Christ*.

Bonhoeffer's presupposed hermeneutical question of God's word and the implied Christological question provides churches with a mirror constantly confronting churches with his question of *who Jesus Christ is for us today*.

Bonhoeffer's question of who Christ is for us today, developed in light of his Christological imperative, might assist the church to recognise the reality of Christ *in the midst of the world*. The question is precisely not supposed to give the church a clear cut answer to the question, it is not intended to show the church what church ought to be. The question rather asks how



the differentiated confrontation implicit in the question conforms the church to Christ's *gestalt* in the world ever anew.<sup>14</sup>

Bonhoeffer's reflections, thirdly, put the churches in South Africa in front of *the mirror of questioning history*.

In South Africa, the questions behind these historical mirrors are of particular importance. It is interesting that Bonhoeffer scholar Robert Vosloo's recent *Reforming Memory. Essays on South African Church and Theological History* (2017) reflects precisely also on the questions raised by what is here described as a mirror of history. Memories, or the ways in which we remember often wound others through the way in which we construct the past. For Vosloo, memory therefore not only has a reforming capacity, but is in itself in need of reformation, even of transformation. He therefore pleads for a "responsible recollection and representation of our shared, but also ambivalent and divisive, past", in short, a responsible historic hermeneutic (Vosloo, 2017:ix).<sup>15</sup>

The plethora of different churches in South Africa indeed look into different historical mirrors. Bonhoeffer's presupposed hermeneutic that takes history seriously thus at least asks churches looking into mirrors as to their presupposed understandings of their histories and the implications thereof.

The histories we wish to remember as that which God did in and during the history of a church impacts on the way we reflect on the church today. How is God really to be seen in these histories? What histories do we rather not remember as God's history with a church, and what implications will that have for our churches looking into these mirrors?

Fourthly, Bonhoeffer's reflections places the churches in South Africa in front of *the mirror of the other*.

Dirkje Smit, in an article on Bonhoeffer and the other, argued that one of the most important challenges to South African Christians and theologians flowing from Bonhoeffer's legacy, is the importance of learning to live with the other. In fact, this challenge, he reiterates, is perhaps more urgent than ever before (Smit, 1995:3).

The question for churches in South Africa is, *inter alia*, if we are not too confined to the mirror of *our own church*? It was Bonhoeffer who in a letter to Bethge, on the day of baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge, stated that the church he is part of has been fighting during these years only for its *own* preservation, as if that were an end in itself (DBWE 8:389, my italics). Are we not precisely also to look in the mirror of the other to be able to reflect on the knowledge of God and ourselves?

Finally, Bonhoeffer's reception of Luther's two kingdoms thought puts before churches the question of the relation *between church and wherever the church finds itself*, asking critical questions about the church's role in spheres not confined to the church. How are churches to understand their role in these spheres?

Although two kingdoms thought have not been *the* way of dealing with the relation between church and wherever the church finds itself in South Africa, a detailed reflection on Bonhoeffer's thoughts in this regard mirrors the fact that Bonhoeffer is looking for ways in which the church will remain *church* – without being consumed fully by the world. It is thus not merely a question of the church's role in spheres not confined to the church, but rather also about the church being church, what he called the *true* church. It asks not only if the church is still the church, but the more foundational question, what is it, that makes the church *church*.

It is thus clear that a reflection on Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic presuppositions and the implications thereof as questioning mirrors churches are to look into provides churches in

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Van der Westhuizen (2017).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. in this regard also Plaatjes-Van Huffel and Vosloo (2013), where the authors attempt to connect remembrance and justice.



South Africa with important questions that they are to reflect on. The essay at least presumed to give hermeneutical impulses for churches looking into mirrors.

It is, however, not *only* Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic that might give churches the necessary impulses to look into mirrors, *to ask important questions anew*. His hermeneutic imputes churches to consider anew what Bonhoeffer himself in his reflections on America clearly recognised as the church's most important concern.

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