Christ-Centred Concreteness: The Christian Activism of Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr[1]

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Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr were Christian leaders whose lives insisted on faithfulness that led them against the laws of their time. They were advocates of social justice and human rights who resisted the temptation towards a secularising, two-realms split that makes Christianity a private life religion; they defied contemporary norms, and they faced opposition to their work from their fellow Christians. Yet, today we see that they were right, and their contemporaries were wrong. We may learn from their prophetic witness for Christian faithfulness in our contexts, by paying attention to their respective interpretations of the way of Jesus.

Keywords

Harlem Renaissance; Harriet Tubman; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Martin Luther King Jr; agape; justice

The Inherent Virtue of White Christian Men

I once attended a large two-day evangelical men's conference in Oakland, California with a group of friends. One particular conference speaker left a strong impression on the gathering as he described the correlation between Christian men and virtue. "Imagine walking through a dimly-lit alley late at night," he said, "only to encounter a group of guys approaching at a distance." He continued, "Would it make a difference to you if you knew that they were coming from a bar, or from a Bible study?" The answer was supposed to be obvious: "Of course it would make a difference!" he said. "You'd want them to be coming from a Bible Study!" Because, according to the speaker, Christian men don't harm; they are inherently people of virtuous character.

The speaker framed a picture of Christian men in the world that was a one-sided account of Christian men. As such, it was a bias-driven self-assurance. He made no provision for those who would not feel comfortable

[1] This material was first presented as the keynote McClendon lecture at the Baptist House, Amsterdam on 19 November 2018.

with Christian men approaching them in the alley. We need not look far, especially historically, to find people who would indeed be terrified.

The antebellum South of the USA is one of those places where black people would not want to see white Christian men approaching. White Christians argued that a slave society was a God-ordained system, and because of it, everyone flourished within their natural, God-given capacity.[2] Enslaved black people, and any abolitionist within reach of what became the Confederacy, who argued that the gospel contradicted the grand claims of the slave society, exposed themselves to the very real possibility of a violent death.

Years later, the children of slave-owners maintained white space as holy space. Accordingly, Jim Crow racial segregation was as moral as it was legal. The refrain, "No-blacks-allowed", was echoed by its European progeny in 1935 when the Nazis enacted the Nuremberg laws in Hitler's Germany to legislate a *Herrenrasse* (master race) nation, and to render sacred their anti-Semitism. The Nuremberg laws were made possible by German Christian support for a strong moral leader to make Germany great again. What comfort would antebellum black people, Jim Crow era black people, or Jews in Nazi Germany find in that alley as white Christian men approached? The passing of time is not sufficient to correct the blatant errors in an earlier Christian witness; we must identify a more significant mechanism for the necessary correction.

The speaker at the men's conference in Oakland gave reason to the men at that gathering for their strong in-group resolve to claim their divinely ordained leadership roles by stoking devotion to unproven, moral high ground. And, if they indeed rested upon such moral foundations, they were not only deserving of authority and leadership roles; the well-being of society depends upon them in leadership. Yet, given the history of Christian social and political impact, claims of intrinsic Christian morality should arrest all who hear that assertion. How does the speaker validate his claim about the connection between Christian identity and virtuous character in the laboratory of world history? Who is this 'we' he was referring to, who would obviously feel safe as Christian men approached?

The Three Witnesses

Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were Christian leaders who belied the rhetoric of intrinsic Christian virtue. Within

[2] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, 'The Divine Sanction of the Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume LV, Issue 2 (1 July 1987), 211–234.

their contexts, the three leaders modelled a faith that resisted injustice. Their hermeneutic of the way of Jesus was tethered to concepts of love, freedom, justice, and community, yet they faced violent opposition from sources that identified chiefly as Christian. Harriet Tubman's opponents comprised an entire nation, its government replete with legal and political systems that were reinforced by a Christian imagination that defined humanity according to hegemonic norms, for whites only. Accordingly, whites alone were gifted with God's image, and black people were to serve them. Harriet Tubman defied that slave world as a fugitive and outlaw Christian leader. She became the best-known conductor of the infamous Underground Railroad.

Bonhoeffer's opponents comprised members of the German Christians' Movement, who sought to apply the Führer Principle within a unified Protestant church, making Adolf Hitler the leader of the nation's Protestant church as well as the Reich Chancellor.[3] They saw no inconsistency between the Nazi social and political goals and the claims of the gospel. But Bonhoeffer did. Service to Christ meant being and doing something very different from what was popular in the context of that totalitarian government.

In the United States, Martin Luther King Jr was the most recognised spokesperson for the civil rights movement that promoted non-cooperation with the political, economic, and social structures organised and maintained by Jim Crow. As with Tubman and Bonhoeffer before him, King was propelled by Christian devotion as he led many others in the country in non-violent defiance of legal, even theological obstacles. The resistance that Tubman, Bonhoeffer, and King met from Christians illustrates that the mere label 'Christian' does not indicate that one is, or could ever be, virtuous, or concerned about the well-being of others. What matters is our understanding of what it means to follow the way of Jesus.

The Argument

This essay will look at Harriet Tubman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King Jr to inquire of them what inspired their Christian witness, in order to mine their witness for content to guide our Christian leadership today. All three of them interpreted the gospel to advocate behaviour that was illegal in their context, which made their Christianity antithetical to what was commonly understood as decent Christian living. They represent different hermeneutics of the work of God in the way of Jesus. Christian hermeneutics are regularly in service to economic and biological goals, but

[3] See Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

the Christianity I am examining here employed a hermeneutic that opposed ideological hegemonies that typically support harmful politics. Their Christian hermeneutic was inspired opposition to the biological anthropology that gave ideological support to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The prophetic Christian witness of Tubman was present within the Christian tradition that Bonhoeffer met in New York as a student at Union Seminary and lay leader at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Martin Luther King Jr was formed within that prophetic black tradition as a black Baptist preacher, raised in a family tradition of black Baptist ministers. Their Christian witness is first shaped, and later influenced, by an interpretation of God with us in the struggle, working to remove obstacles that prevent our ability to be together in community.

Delivering Love as Liberation

The concept of community is a basic conviction that is shared between the three leaders. Enslaved Christians embraced a hermeneutic of Christ with and among them in the day-to-day, not authorising the hierarchy and abuse of a slave-owning Christian world but sharing in their suffering at the hands of the state. In the hidden 'hush harbors', enslaved Christians gathered for worship without whites present. Such worship was illegal, following Nat Turner's uprising in 1831. Yet in the 'hush harbors' they risked life and limb to celebrate an outlaw Christianity, one that saw the image of the divine in the community bought and sold by whites, and daily encounter was the site for discerning Christian faithfulness, rather than concepts of doctrinal or biblical purity. Accordingly, receiving one another with love and liberation from bondage were divine as well as human goals.

The theme of encounter is later seen with Bonhoeffer and King during their most active years of protest. Like Tubman, Bonhoeffer and King demonstrate an interpretation of the way of Jesus seen in the connection between love and justice that interprets *agape* as 'delivering love'.[4] Tubman, Bonhoeffer, and King acted on the meaning of delivering love in their context, to resist injustice and encourage freedom and justice for social transformation. Tubman's role as a conductor on the Underground Railroad was not to secure social transformation; it was a pursuit of freedom. With Bonhoeffer and King, the way of social transformation comes through engagement with agape. Bonhoeffer described Jesus with historical concreteness as 'vicarious representation', or *Stellvertretung*, while King

[4] Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 333ff.

interpreted Jesus as the one who embodied 'love correcting what would work against love'.[5]

A Singular Problem

The problem that the three faced was informed by ideological developments from the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It was then that the claims of a sovereign figure as representation of human beings was stabilised. This sovereign, the European white man, named and organised all of human life as it corresponded aesthetically to himself. He became the template for humankind. Theology, as shaped within the community of European empires, gave sacred licence to his ideological development. It was the foundational Christian imagination that animated the newly emerging western world. That is the situation within which we find the antithetical Christianity of Harriet Tubman and the enslaved of the United States.

The European sovereign was the fantasy of a self-possessed, autonomous, masculine that aided in the division of the world into what we know today as the global south, east, the middle east and the west. His model of social engagement was consumption, in a practice of defining himself with the knowledge content he crafted of others, as he explained the world and his place in it. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, he seized, marked, and claimed epistemological ownership of African bodies as he worked to stabilise himself as the ideal and the template for all of humanity. His conceptual rendering of human beings measured all of life in aesthetic proximity to himself. To quote Du Bois, he views himself in 'ownership of the Earth forever and ever, Amen!'[6] And by his word he speaks into being all others in relationship to himself. This was the central problem faced by all three figures. It developed into three overtly racist regimes in the twentieth century in the Jim Crow South, Nazi Germany, and Apartheid South Africa, but it emerged during slavery.

Harriet Tubman deployed an epistemological intervention through a hermeneutic of God with us. She knew the fugitive Christianity of the 'hush harbors', which was a departure from white Christian worship, and eventually emboldened her to depart physically from the place of her enslavement. She was nearly thirty years old when she first navigated dangerous unknown terrain, and violent slave patrols that had legal authority

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[5] James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 62.

[6] See W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Souls of White Folks', in *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), pp. 17-30.

to kill her on sight, as she made her way towards freedom in the North. Freedom was new terrain. But she became familiar with it, and the dangerous route to see it, on the Underground Railroad. Freedom was not a possession to be held but a way of existing in relationship to others. It was for the well-being of community. Tubman enacted freedom as pursuit of liberation for the people of God in bondage to white slavers in the antebellum South. She made more than a dozen long, dangerous treks back into the land of captivity to travel the Underground Railroad. As a conductor on the Underground Railroad, she plundered a southern economy that relied on the stolen humanity of her passengers. As she saw it, freedom is something for which we are all made. To say otherwise is to slander God's very image, which was given to all human beings. In her life, she was also a spy for the Union during the Civil War, a nurse for the military, in addition to founding a home for the formerly enslaved as they transitioned to freedom. Harriet Tubman passed away in 1913 as the most celebrated conductor of the Underground Railroad.

Some Shared Understandings

The tradition that shaped Harriet Tubman had an effect on our other two figures. Bonhoeffer did not have direct impact on King, but the two theologians shared lots in common. Both argued that the Christian faith is lived faithfully only as engagement with the world. They sought to live the story and meaning of Jesus concretely in the world, in contrast to versions of the faith that reduced the social demands of the gospel that call us to act in favour of what Bonhoeffer called the *sanctorum communio,* communion of saints, and what King described as the beloved community.[7]

The two men dealt with legalised cruelty against socially marginalised people, and Christian apathy towards it. Both were influenced by a black Baptist tradition; King was raised in a family lineage of black Baptist pastors,[8] and during his year of study in America, Bonhoeffer was a lay leader at Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem, New York. Bonhoeffer was an active participant in the ministry of Abyssinian, while he was a Sloane Fellow in 1930-31.[9]

It was during his time as a Sloane Fellow in New York that Bonhoeffer was exposed to the Harlem Renaissance literary movement, with its critical interrogation of the lethal combination of race and religion. The literary

[7] See M. Shawn Copeland, 'Bonhoeffer, King, and Themes in Catholic Social Thought', in Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride, *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 83.
[8] Rufus Burrow and Lewis V. Baldwin, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 78.
[9] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. edn (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 150ff. See Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*.

movement was ongoing during Bonhoeffer's Sloane Fellowship year and, at Union, Bonhoeffer formally processed the Renaissance movement's analysis of race oppression, politics, and religion in class with Reinhold Niebuhr. That Harlem-world engagement also piqued his abiding interest in Mohandas Gandhi's work in India and helped to inspire Bonhoeffer's sympathy for a justice-oriented, non-violent interpretation of the Way of Jesus.[10]

With the exception of the time period, much of the same things can be said about King. He too was influenced by Dr Reinhold Niebuhr, held Gandhi in high regard, and was an advocate of non-violence.[11] Both Bonhoeffer and King were sympathetic towards Walter Rauschenbusch's interpretation of the social gospel.[12] Both were aware of individual sinfulness, yet they placed a primacy on collective, social responsibility in a mutual insistence on the importance of community. For King, the means we employ to resist injustice must be the same that will guide our social relations once the injustice is removed. Christ provided the means; love, mutual concern, and peacemaking are what he understood as the means and the goals of the beloved community.[13] Christianity was for Bonhoeffer, community, in and through Jesus; Christ is foundation and mediator. Their insistence on the concrete social expression of love for others was the direct result of their faith. Conversely, freedom from others was the definition of sin, as it turned the heart inward on itself.[14] Publicly, sin is the abandonment of social concerns, and apathy towards the neighbour in need. Their emphasis on a public, active faith in Christ as love-in-action on behalf of the oppressed was, for both of them, a cause for which they gave their lives. Both were killed in April of their thirty-ninth year of life.

Some Differences

Bonhoeffer and King also varied from one another. Bonhoeffer did not have much support as he opposed the Nazis. Most Christians in Germany

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[10] See Jenkins and McBride, *Bonhoeffer and King*, pp. 81-82.

[11] Bonhoeffer's friend, Al Fisher, is a direct link between the two men. See Charles Marsh, 'Bonhoeffer on the Road to King: Turning from the Phraseological to the Real', in Willis Jenkins and Jennifer M. McBride, *Bonhoeffer and King: Their Legacies and Import for Christian Social Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 123-138.

[12] Bonhoeffer was also very critical of the Social Gospel. I am referring to Bonhoeffer's claim that '*The Prayer for the Social Gospel*, by W. Rauschenbusch, is one of the most passionate and beautiful witnesses of this thinking.' See Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English (DBWE), Vol. 10: 318.

[13] See Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press), pp. 67ff., pp. 89ff. See Martin Luther King Jr, *Strength To Love* (Cleveland, OH: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 39-48.

[14] Bonhoeffer described sin in the Lutheran tradition of 'the heart turned in on itself'. Freedom from others is the inability to be for others. See Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 122.

supported Hitler's regime, which helped to propel his Nazi movement to the juggernaut of power that it became. Unlike King, Bonhoeffer struggled for recognisable theological ground to stand on within his German Lutheran tradition, to help inspire German Christians to confront social and political evil.

Bonhoeffer's tools for resistance were foreign imports. His early mentors were men who had 'incorporated the history of the state into their theology to such an extent that they could virtually equate the foreign policy of the Reich with the kingdom of God on earth'.[15] Like many other influential German theologians, Bonhoeffer's mentors blended nationalism and religion in a way that 'elevated Luther's version of the two kingdoms to dogmatic status'.[16]

The combination of Luther's notion of the two kingdoms and German nationalism nurtured a mutually reinforcing sympathy for a Prussian-German Empire and its imperialistic destiny in the world.[17] And, although a barrier was theoretically in place between church and government, the reality was a sanctified social Darwinism in which national and economic struggle occurred in accordance with God's 'orders of creation'.[18]

Bonhoeffer had to confront and modify these harmful elements within his own theology, and that of his fellow Christians in Germany. In addition, the anti-Semitism that was popular within Bonhoeffer's context limited his use of the Old Testament. When he made use of the Old Testament as a professor at the University of Berlin, Bonhoeffer was careful to address the corrupt notion of *orders* derived from the Old Testament that argued in favour of Aryan superiority.[19] He made use of the Old Testament to argue his Christology, and not for the rich witness to justice in the prophets. King did not suffer from these disadvantages.

King had full use of the Bible, and a black Baptist church tradition that linked the message of love in the New Testament with the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos: 'Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'[20]

But the influence that Bonhoeffer and King placed on the Sermon on the Mount helped both of them to see love and justice as core to the way of

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[15] John W. De Gruchy, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 18-19.
[16] Ibid., p. 19.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Glen Harold Stassen, 'Healing the Rift between the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 18, no. 3 (2016), 89-105 (p. 90).
[19] J. Deotis Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King: Speaking Truth to Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 126.
[20] Amos 5.24 quoted in Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King*, p. 127.

Jesus. King's advocacy for social justice drew directly from it, connecting what he admired of Gandhi with the 'love ethic' he saw in the Sermon, to provide guidance to confront evil in society.[21] Bonhoeffer's perception of Hitler's evil and opposition to him was indebted to the Sermon, but his interpretation of it did not provide him with the same tools to confront the injustice and social evil of his time.

We may again attribute this disparity to their different contexts. Given his context, the question: Who is Christ actually for us today? for King was a quest for Christ-centred guidance as a black man, within the tradition of Christianity inherited from 'hush harbors', living in a violently racist, segregated society. Bonhoeffer travelled a similar route of discovery for guidance in the context of a warmongering, racist, and homicidal government, but his understanding of Jesus' relevance in pursuit of justice outside of the church came much later than it did for King.

Delivering Love

Stassen argues that Jesus' love ethic is the hermeneutical key to his social commands. Stassen claims that agape is often defined as sacrificial love, which sees the normative way of Jesus as sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice.[22] By contrast, Stassen advocates an interpretation of agape as delivering love, which is a theme that echoes the Christian concept of liberation embraced in the 'hush harbors'. He describes the work of God in Christ as the norm for Christian love occurring as the drama of deliverance in four parts.[23] Delivering love sees with compassion and enters into the situation of the outcast and oppressed; it does deeds of deliverance on behalf of the other; it invites the other into community with freedom, justice, and responsibility for the future, and it confronts those who exclude.[24] Thus, the drama behind the word love is not sacrifice without expectation; love is behaviour that is done for the well-being of others.

Different Contexts for Ministry

The civil rights protests led by King, the Montgomery Improvement Association, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, had liberation as their goal. King echoes the argument for a Christian praxis of delivering love, in the face of Southern racist hate, by claiming that agape love is

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[21] Martin Luther King and Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998), p. 23.
[22] Anders Nygren's book *Agape and Eros* has been very influential in promoting this definition of agape. See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).
[23] Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, p. 333.
[24] Ibid., pp. 333-339.

> Christian love, it is…the love of God operating in the human heart…The greatness of it is that you love every man, not for your sake but for his sake…you love every man because God loves him…and so it becomes all inclusive.[25]

Delivering love empowers freedom for others.

The context of the civil rights movement was different from Bonhoeffer's in Nazi Germany. But their resistance placed them in similar struggles. King learned and appropriated Jesus' way of approximating delivering love in his Christ-centred resistance. His interpretation of the Sermon resembles what Stassen calls 'transforming initiatives'.[26]

Transforming Initiatives: King to Bonhoeffer

In *Discipleship,* Bonhoeffer argues that the Sermon on the Mount represents concrete commandments that Jesus expects followers to observe.[27] He argues that the Sermon is for guidance in daily life, not high ideals that demonstrate the impossibility of pleasing God, which leads to 'cheap grace'. Cheap grace is grace as presupposition that we may do as we please, rather than follow Christ. Stassen agrees with Bonhoeffer about the errors of cheap grace, but he adds a correction to the way that Bonhoeffer interprets the Sermon. For Bonhoeffer, the Sermon teaches 'dyadic antitheses' of renunciation. He read the Sermon to highlight negative behaviour that we are to avoid. Instead, Stassen argues that the Sermon consists of fourteen teachings that are triadic in their structure, highlighting transforming initiatives that we are to do. 'You have heard it said' is a recognition of *traditional righteousness*, which is typically followed by a *diagnosis of a vicious cycle* with the words 'but I say'. The vicious cycle refers to attitudes and behaviours that we indulge in and that do harm. In light of the prophetic witness of Tubman, Bonhoeffer, and King, the vicious cycles that they addressed were characterised by dominating systems and structures that conditioned privileged subjects to treat social others as objects and pollutants rather than as people with whom to relate as fellow humans. The third moment addresses the vicious cycle. It is the commandment that we are to follow, the *transforming initiative* of confrontation that typically begins with 'therefore', and commonly addresses power differentials.[28] For example:

> Consider [Matthew] 5.38ff., on the traditional teaching of eye for an eye; the vicious cycle of resisting revengefully, and the transforming initiatives of the cheek, the cloak, the second mile, and the gift to the beggar. The emphasis there is not on renouncing revengeful resistance, but on taking transforming initiatives

[25] Martin Luther King, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr Volume VI: Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948-March 1963* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 437ff.
[26] Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 132ff.
[27] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship.* DBWE Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
[28] Stassen, 'Healing the Rift', p. 97.

> toward the enemy. It is not on allowing the enemy to hit me again, but seizing the initiative and turning the cheek of nonviolent equal dignity. The emphasis is not on complying with the demand to carry the Roman soldier's pack one mile, but on going a second mile on my own initiative, and surely talking and seeking peace and justice on the way. It is not on giving up the demanded coat, but taking the initiative of giving the shirt too, thus stripping naked and nonviolently confronting the unjust, rapacious greed.[29]

Because Bonhoeffer's dyadic antithesis stopped short of seeing a diagnosis of vicious cycles, Bonhoeffer failed to recognise the efficacy of the Sermon to provide concrete guidance; he surrendered vital Christ-centred norms when they may have been most helpful. But that was not the case for King.

Bonhoeffer to King

King's interpretation of the Sermon's love ethic approximated delivering love practised with concrete guidance, but he could have benefitted from Bonhoeffer's incarnational emphasis on Jesus' 'vicarious, empathic representation', or *Stellvertretung*. Bonhoeffer interpreted the incarnation as a moment that changed reality. Christ took 'the world up into himself … [thus] establish[ing] an ontological coherence'[30] of God's reality with the reality of the world and the reunion of God with the world. The reunion between God and creation was accomplished in Christ, and Christ became the new reality for all of humanity in a concrete sense. Thus, to behave responsibly is to act in correspondence with what is now a Christo-morphic reality resulting from the incarnation. Christ is now the way to see, and to experience the world and all of our relationships. Responsible action is 'the entire response, in accord with reality, to the claim of God and my neighbor' as demonstrated by the reunion of God and creation in the incarnation. [31] *Stellvertretung*, translated as 'vicarious representative', fits Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ's incarnational entering into our reality and acting in solidarity with us, thus representing the Christian's responsibility as a disciple. *Stellvertretung* is who Christ is and what Christ does, as empowered by delivering love. Jesus' vicarious representative action frees disciples' hearts for others, and 'restores communion'.[32] As followers of Christ, disciples recognise Christ as mediator; we encounter our neighbour in and through Christ. Unmediated interaction is the rejection of Christ and freedom from others in captivity to the *cor curvum in se,* the heart turned inward on itself. In that state we are unable to love, only able to consume the other in

[29] Ibid., p. 99.
[30] See quotation from Eberhard Bethge in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 16.
[31] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics.* DBWE Vol.6: 280.
[32] Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 38.

an act of self-reflection. Christianity that sees freedom as a personal possession rather than a social condition is vulnerable to seeing others as objects to use for self-revelation rather than people to whom we owe responsible action. It is poised to weaponise the faith against society's most vulnerable. For Bonhoeffer, *Stellvertretung* describes the incarnational emphasis on Christian community; when I encounter another person, I face a decision for or against Christ whom I can only know in our life together.

King and Christ

King's Christology also emphasised the social implications of discipleship. But in doing so, he emphasised Jesus' humanity more than his divinity. Many scholars attribute this to the positive influence of Howard Thurman on his Christology. Thurman claimed that Jesus was among those whose backs have historically been pressed to the wall by politically oppressive regimes.[33] Like Bonhoeffer, King emphasised knowing Jesus by his work, yet they both placed an emphasis on Jesus' suffering, which left them vulnerable to problems related to Christian praxis. Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic of renunciation in *Discipleship*, coupled with his emphasis on the suffering of Jesus, was an inadequate guide for action in the face of Nazi domination. King advocated non-violent resistance to social evil, emphasising the value of redemptive suffering.[34] Yet, we may ask: 'Which suffering is redemptive?'[35] Is it the torment of slaves and Holocaust victims or the suffering of pacifist activists in the practice of non-violent direct action? Was it the anguish of protestors who chose to suffer at the hands of the police, or that of oppressed people who had no choice? What is the role of agency in redemptive suffering? King's advocacy of redemptive suffering was problematic to many black people who had no agency in a violent white racist society, and therefore no choice in suffering. This is where he could have learned from Bonhoeffer.

When compared to Bonhoeffer, King's emphasis on redemptive suffering becomes a principle to guide Christian discipleship, which moves us away from the concreteness that Bonhoeffer emphasises. In his essay, 'After Ten Years', Bonhoeffer argues that principles are not enough, in trying times, to provide guidance for followers of Christ. Adherence to principles can provide a false sense of obedience by securing our fidelity before we encounter the need to act that life will demand of us. Adherence to principles takes the moral life outside of the real world and makes it into

[33] Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King*, p. 127.
[34] Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 41.
[35] Roberts, *Bonhoeffer and King*, p. 128.

something that is accomplished in the abstract, before we engage life.[36] An emphasis on redemptive suffering as a fixed principle of non-violent direct action may be interpreted in this manner, as an abstraction that justifies the Christian prior to action. Redemptive suffering, as a principle of engagement, becomes especially problematic when it is valued without evidence of respect for the lived reality of people who have no choice in suffering. This was the criticism levelled at King by Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, two black leaders who argued instead for Black Power, which gave agency to black people. King's Christian witness for non-violence took Gandhi as the model and Christ as the content, yet Black Power sought to enable black people in a brutal and unjust society that gave black people no rights beyond the right to suffer the abuse of white supremacy.

But action that corresponds with reality is practised in the concreteness of daily life in the world, respecting real needs, while seeking to know the will of God. With Bonhoeffer, we must not pursue principles; we are to say yes to Christ who is life, in the concrete, dynamic, reality of God in the world, asking: What is the will of God? And as a consequence of the question, our incarnational participation in and with Christ will include suffering; yet, we are not justified on principle, we are justified by participation with God in Christ who is our concrete reality.

Bonhoeffer and King Synthesised: An Aesthetics of Welcome

Yet both men share in the prophetic efforts to remove obstacles that prevent our ability to be together in community. The efforts that Bonhoeffer and King made towards justice put them at odds with fellow Christians and authorities in their overtly racist countries. They willingly broke laws. But they did so guided by their Christ-centred resistance of injustice. The Christian tradition that informed Martin Luther King Jr's black Baptist upbringing had roots in the 'hush harbors' that produced Harriet Tubman. It also had a significant formative effect on a young Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A black Baptist tradition helped cultivate Bonhoeffer's theology towards political resistance during his stay in New York from 1930-31.

However, there is much more to investigate within the interpretation of Christ that was guide to our three Christian leaders. If space allowed, it would help to interact with the aesthetics of the black Christian tradition that influenced them. That aesthetic indicates a foundational stimulus that moves beyond the cognitive, which is to say, their theological reasoning, to examine the lenses through which they viewed Christ. Their theology was shaped by a hermeneutic of Christ set within lenses that belied white racist Christian

[36] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. DBWE Vol. 8:37ff.

hermeneutics as devoted to a white Jesus who gave religious endorsement to social and political evil. King's black church tradition revealed that the Christ of white racist Christians was the product of harmful ideology, and manufactured by a racialised aesthetic, as the physical representation of the Enlightenment's ideal human. It is finally in the category of theological aesthetics that we acknowledge visible obstacles to community. Slave-owning Christianity was justified theologically by a white aesthetic that rendered Christ as its progenitor. But the 'hush harbors' saw Christ present in and with black people, which shaped an aesthetic that brought value to the body in the form of an ocular counter to white supremacy, and to the visual impediment to community.

We can hear this aesthetic with King. A year before his death, King delivered a speech several times in different settings, in which he addressed a black aesthetic as valuing black bodies:

> Now this is all I'm saying this morning that we must feel that we count. That we belong. That we are persons. That we are children of the living God. And it means that we go down in our soul and find that somebodiness and we must never again be ashamed of ourselves. We must never be ashamed of our heritage. We must not be ashamed of the color of our skin. Black is as beautiful as any color and we must believe it. And so every black person in this country must rise up and say I'm somebody; I have a rich proud and noble history, however painful and exploited it has been. I am black, but I am black and beautiful.[37]

King's reference to beauty addresses the body beyond what is seen. Aesthetics refers to principles and rules that we affirm visually, often without recognising their presence. Immanuel Kant linked beauty and morality by claiming that beauty is the symbol of morality, and that it is self-evident. Kant's link between beauty and morality corresponds historically with the formation of a white aesthetic that shapes the way we view and value bodies differently in a racialised society. The aesthetics of whiteness had its architects who normalised a racist anthropology as guide to group people into physical categories that also described their character and cognitive abilities as intrinsically moral and intrinsically immoral; those who are biologically predisposed toward goodness and virtue, and those who are biologically immoral and criminal; those who are a law unto themselves, and those who must have the rule of law imposed upon them; those who are natural rulers and authority figures, and those who are naturally hewers of wood and drawers of water; those who are gifted with intellectual abilities, and those who are dumb as rocks; those who are gifted with the image of the Divine and burdened with the task of saving the world, and the heathen who

[37] John Kroll, 'Martin Luther King Jr.: April 26, 1967, Cleveland Speech, Annotated'. *Cleveland.com*, Advance Local Media LLC, 13 Jan. 2013, blog.cleveland.com/pdextra/2012/01/martin_luther_king_jr_april_26.html [accessed 05 November 2018]

need the religion and culture of the holy ones in order to avoid a burning hell. This configuration speaks of something essential about types of human beings that is aesthetically identified and mapped onto our bodies as an indication of who and what we are and the boundaries of our potential. White is always already good, and black is its antithesis. Since the slave trade, the white aesthetic has seized, marked, and claimed epistemological ownership of darker bodies as it worked to stabilise white masculinity as the divine ideal, and the template for all of humanity. It was birthed as an aesthetic that depended upon the most sophisticated reasoning of its time, and it fuelled the oppressive regimes that Tubman, Bonhoeffer, and King resisted. King's assertion that black is beautiful runs counter to the claims of white aesthetics; it unsettles it as normative.

King was speaking from within the tradition that Bonhoeffer met in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, when he read W.E.B. Du Bois. At the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance in 1926, Du Bois argued that black America must begin a 'great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty'.[38] To accomplish this effort, the black creators of beauty must use truth and goodness, 'goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right' in opposition to those who traffic in aesthetic lies and propaganda. Du Bois commissioned the aesthetic truth-tellers as apostles as he continued: 'The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right... His freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize Justice.'[39] With this claim that beauty is in the service of truth and justice, Du Bois commissioned black artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance to go about their work of a different cultural aesthetic, one founded in reality, taking concrete human encounter with people as the point of departure to help people see real human beings instead of stereotypes, and thus to interpret healthier moral interaction. Abstract representations are what stabilise racist norms and give people a sense of being good before an encounter with real life is had, where we are called to be disciples. The white aesthetic presses lives into epistemological slavery to an idealised world. Biological markers like skin colour signal different levels of social worth and moral responsibility in that imaginary world, and the result is actual brokenness for the entire community.

Our three Christian leaders demonstrate that what is good for Christian community may cost the disciple everything. They were willing to give their lives as advocates of an interpretation of the gospel that values embodied

[38] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Criteria of Negro Art', in *The Crisis Reader: Stories, Poetry, And Essays From the NAACP's Crisis Magazine,* ed. by Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: NY Random House Press, 1999), p. 323.
[39] Ibid.

encounter. Theirs was a faith grounded in a praxis of the Lord's supper as reception of the body of Christ as a gift, not as mere consumption. The gift of Christ's body in the Lord's supper invites us to remember the body that carries the marks of violence. With them we see how living communion as a praxis of solidarity may help us in our efforts in Christian leadership. By orienting our lives in this way, in a praxis of communion solidarity we move far beyond claims of intrinsic Christian virtue, to open ourselves to the work of removing the obstacles that prohibit our ability to really encounter one another.

Conclusion

Tubman, Bonhoeffer, and King provide us with different lenses through which to look at the way of Jesus in a way that does not conform to political expediency in troubling times. They were inspired by faith in Christ to pay attention to embodied needs of marginalised neighbours, which led them in opposition to their government. From them we learn that following Jesus requires an interpretation of holy living that includes the pursuit of liberation, and a boldness that takes us beyond ourselves, perhaps even into political and social resistance as fugitives with a fugitive faith. If we are to take their lessons to heart, we must not rely on empty claims of intrinsic Christian moral virtue; rather we must ask and be open to the answer that comes after the question: What are we to do in our present context to follow Jesus?

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