

Prophecy, Protest and Public Theology: The Relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Prophetic Mandate in Today's Post-truth World

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German pastor, theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), maintained that in situations of rampant injustice, Christians are commanded by Christ to love their neighbour by taking a stand against evil. Bonhoeffer's life and legacy remind us that Christian compassion is obliged to express itself in protest, active resistance and civil disobedience — in other words, by 'putting a spoke in the wheel of injustice'. In this article I will explore how Bonhoeffer's life and legacy can help Christians to discover their public witness to the world in terms of prophetic protest.

Keywords

Bonhoeffer; prophecy; protest; post-truth

Introduction

Bonhoeffer maintained that in situations of rampant injustice, Christians are commanded by Christ to love their neighbour by taking a stand against evil. Bonhoeffer's costly discipleship teaches us to guard against our natural tendency to think about compassion in romanticised or sentimentalised terms. Jesus's compassion, Bonhoeffer noted, was not expressed in sentimental platitudes. As well as offering comfort to those who suffer, Christian compassion also includes moral courage in order to resist evil.¹ Through his experience of resisting Hitler, Bonhoeffer understood that to be compassionate in a context of corruption, injustice and the lies and fabrications of a state-controlled media meant engaging in spiritual warfare. Loving one's neighbour was a matter of casting down strongholds through prayer and prophetic engagement with the principalities and powers, which enslave and denigrate people. Deeds of mercy needed to be combined with prophetic acts on behalf of justice. Walter Wink maintained that 'we cannot speak of love and at the same time be part of institutional structures that

¹ Joshua T. Searle, *Theology After Christendom: Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), p. 138.

perpetuate injustice'.² Christian compassion does not just motivate us to pull bodies out of the water; it also induces us to go upstream, find out who is pushing them into the river and to resist evil in the name of Christ.³ Bonhoeffer's life and legacy remind us that Christian compassion is obliged to express itself in protest, active resistance, and civil disobedience — in other words, by 'putting a spoke in the wheel of injustice'.⁴ In this article I will explore how Bonhoeffer's life and legacy can help Christians to discover their public witness to the world in terms of prophetic protest.

Bonhoeffer the Prophet

What do we mean when we refer to Bonhoeffer as a prophet? Prophecy is a term that has been so universally misunderstood by Christians that when a genuinely prophetic word is spoken, most people are unable to perceive it. Prophecy has been cheapened and demeaned by those who associate it with bizarre speculation about the end times. It thus needs to be said at the outset that true prophecy has nothing to do with speculative ferment that indulges in biblical code-cracking or date-setting for Doomsday. Prophecy has nothing to do with facile speculations that attempt to find specious connections between the apocalyptic Beast (Revelation 13) and prominent political or religious leaders. Despite all the online ferment and far-fetched conspiracy theories, there is nothing prophetic about trying to identify the Antichrist and the False Prophet with Pope Francis, Paul McCartney or the European Union. Prophecy is not about trying to set out a mechanical itinerary of future events.⁵

The truly prophetic figure, by contrast, is someone who is aware of the spiritual forces acting in history and who knows all the possibilities contained within the infinite sphere of the effective action of God for whom all things are possible. The true goal of biblical prophecy, as Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) pointed out, is 'to indicate what is possible and to deflect what should not be, by an appeal to repentance and courage'.⁶ Prophecy is not a matter of passive expectation, but of creative realisation. Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) concurred that it 'is not prediction, it is not a forecasting of events. Rather, it is the vision which apprehends things present in the light of their eternal issues. It is apocalyptic, it is an unveiling.'⁷ The prophet

² Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 153.

³ Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), p. 14.

⁴ Renate Wind, *Dem Rad in die Speichen fallen: die Lebensgeschichte des Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag-Haus, 2006).

⁵ Joshua T. Searle, *Theology After Christendom*, pp. 26–27.

⁶ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 246.

⁷ George Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: J. Clarke, 1950), p. 119.

envisages the future across the boundaries of the present, but they see only as one looking through a glass darkly. The prophet views present realities *sub specie aeternitatis* — from the perspective of eternity. In the words of Berdyaev, the prophet ‘glimpses the mystical realities that lie behind particular historical events and disclose their limited objectives with the religious meaning of the world’.⁸ Bonhoeffer was a prophet to the extent that he was endowed with faculties of spiritual perception that made visible the savagery of demonic spirits that had incarnated themselves within the ‘banality of evil’ that characterised the everyday existence and the institutions of Nazi Germany.⁹ Bonhoeffer had a rare gift of being able to penetrate beyond the façade of superficial social reality and to bring to light the true nature of the issues. Reality, for Bonhoeffer, was fundamentally spiritual. He recognised, in common with some of the finest minds in history from Plato to Kant, that there is a deeper reality beyond the visible appearance of physical things and historical events. Reality should therefore not be conflated with mere appearance and spectacle — and certainly not with banal or triumphalist political sentiment, such as the trite clichés of Nazism. With the clarity of his prophetic insight Bonhoeffer thus understood that the Nazi Party signified not only a pathological political ideology, but also symbolised or embodied an underlying spiritual and metaphysical disease.¹⁰

In a world like ours today, in which lying has become a form of art and deceit constitutes the default mode of social reality, it is very difficult to live in the truth. Since social reality is saturated in falsehood and superficiality, it takes sustained effort and constant vigilance to live in the depth of truth. Truthful speech is distrusted and even despised by the majority of people because it threatens to expose the foundation of lies upon which social conventions and political institutions repose. Berdyaev claimed that ‘the pure, undistorted, disinterested truth of Christianity could endanger the very existence of the world. For worldly societies and civilizations, Christian truth is like a consuming fire descending from heaven.’¹¹

The early twentieth century existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), with which Bonhoeffer was deeply acquainted,¹² compellingly demonstrated that for individuals it is far easier and more comforting to live a lie than to live the

⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Sub Specie Aeternitatis ili s Tochki Zrenia Vechnosti* (Moscow: T8RUGRAM, 2018), p. 8.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1963).

¹⁰ The term, ‘metaphysical disease’, is taken from E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (London: Sphere, 1974), p. 83.

¹¹ Nikolai Berdyaev, *Istina i Otkrovenie* (Moscow: T8RUGRAM, 2018), p. 32.

¹² Peter Frick, *Understanding Bonhoeffer* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), pp. 138–40.

truth.¹³ As Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) put it, the gospel presents every human being with a basic choice: either to choose the authentic existence of walking in the truth with Christ (cf. 3 John 1:4) or to live an inauthentic existence in which we lose ourselves to the trivial distractions of entertainment and superficiality.¹⁴ Will we live life with Christ or without Christ? One of the aims of the prophet is to empower people to live with the vulnerability and risk to which we expose ourselves when we live in a condition of authentic Christian freedom. The prophet enables us to protest against the blind acceptance of traditions and customs that are inspired by what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) called the ‘herd instinct’ (*Herdentrieb*)¹⁵ that governs the collective consciousness. In contemporary social and political discourse this impulse is sometimes labelled ‘public opinion’ or the ‘will of the people’.

The Emergence of a New Kind of Christianity

What marks Bonhoeffer out as a prophet, rather than as a mere theologian or social commentator, is his ability to see beyond the superficial events of their times and to perceive the raging abyss that was surging beneath the surface of world history. He was prophetic to the extent that he understood that the gospel required Christians not to withdraw from society, but to express their solidarity with the world in all its fallenness and suffering.¹⁶ This conviction lies behind Bonhoeffer’s anticipation of the emergence of a new expression of a world-orientated Christianity.¹⁷ In other words, Bonhoeffer was working out a new kind of theology that would be appropriate for an emerging post-Christian age. With the passion, intensity and devotion of a prophet, Bonhoeffer saw that Christianity was no longer the dominant force in contemporary society. He did not preach ‘peace, peace’, when there was no peace and he asked searching questions about what this new reality meant for Christian existence in a post-Christian world.¹⁸

In a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge (1909–2000), Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell on 30 April 1944 that

¹³ John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (London: SCM, 1960), p. 22.

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), p. 84.

¹⁵ Günter Abel, *Nietzsche: die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), p. 54.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6: Ethics*, ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), p. 258.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, in *Ethics*, ed. by Green, p. 256.

¹⁸ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

what is bothering me incessantly is the question of what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today [...] We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as “religious” do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by “religious” [...] and if therefore man becomes radically religionless — and I think that that is already more or less the case [...] what does that mean for Christianity?¹⁹

Bonhoeffer realised ahead of his time the radical implications for Christian existence of the demise of bourgeois religiosity, which Kierkegaard had called ‘Sunday Christianity’.²⁰ Bonhoeffer’s aim was to expound a vision of theology that recognised that Christ was Lord not just of religion or of church symbols and rituals, but of the whole of life. As Bonhoeffer put it, ‘Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world.’²¹ Out of this conviction, Bonhoeffer rejected the fallacy of dividing the world into its sacred and secular dimensions. Bonhoeffer maintained that

there are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world [...] Because this is so, the theme of two realms, which has dominated the history of the church again and again is foreign to the New Testament.²²

One of the key themes that connects the scattered fragments of Bonhoeffer’s theological writings is Christ’s solidarity with the world in its immeasurable suffering. ‘The world’, Bonhoeffer affirmed, ‘is not divided into parts between Christ and the devil, it is the holistic world of Christ, whether or not the world itself knows this.’²³ Accordingly, Bonhoeffer insisted that faith should be joined to every sphere of life, including politics, business and the media, as well as religion and education. Faith cannot be confined to private morality or to church attendance, but the rule of Christ should be extended to all of life in recognition that ‘the world is the Lord’s and all that is therein’ (Psalm 24:1).

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 279.

²⁰ See chapter 4 of John Heywood Thomas, *The Legacy of Kierkegaard* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 281.

²² Bonhoeffer, quoted in David M. Gides, *Pacifism, Just War, and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Church-World Theology and His Changing Forms of Political Thinking and Involvement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), p. 334.

²³ Bonhoeffer, quoted in John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), p. 215.

Bonhoeffer's Critique of Cheap Grace as a Prophetic Challenge

As is well known, Bonhoeffer criticised the tendency of Christians to view their faith mainly in terms of intellectual fidelity to a system of beliefs. He called this 'cheap grace'.²⁴ In Bonhoeffer's view, as well as impoverishing the spiritual lives of individual Christians, cheap grace had consequences that extended even beyond the key issue of personal discipleship; this kind of cheap grace also contributed to the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany.²⁵ Cheap grace had tilled the spiritual soil of the German nation, thus creating a fertile breeding ground for the ideological perversions and theological blasphemies of Nazism. By reducing Christianity to a private, pietistic religion of salvation from sin that had no necessary material connection with the believer's life, character or conduct, the vast majority of German Christians were both morally and spiritually unequipped to resist Hitler.²⁶ Moreover, since most German Christians had no tradition of thinking theologically or biblically about political events, many Christians even accepted Hitler's rise to power as 'the will of God'. Although genocide was an integral part of Nazi ideology, these Christians supported Hitler because he had promised to restore law and order and traditional family values after the chaos and perceived decadence of Weimar Germany.²⁷

Bonhoeffer recognised that the rupture between life and salvation, between faith and obedience, created by 'cheap grace', had led to the enfeeblement of Christianity's prophetic witness to the world. As a result of cheap grace, the differences between born-again Christians and the general population tend to be primarily cosmetic, concerning matters of doctrine, worldview and behaviour. At the deeper, structural level of consciousness and spiritual formation, many Christians are just as captive to the anti-gospel forces of consumerism, and are just as indifferent to the pain of the world as everyone else. Thus, as was the case in Bonhoeffer's time, the response of many Christians today to salient issues that emerge from the public sphere is often devoid of a theological basis and sometimes directly contradicts fundamental biblical-theological principles of truth-telling, humility, honesty and integrity — one thinks, for example, of the overwhelming support of evangelicals for Donald Trump or the finding that Anglican

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 43–45.

²⁵ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 386.

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 57–59.

²⁷ Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Christians in the UK were significantly more likely to vote for Brexit than the rest of the population.²⁸

Prophets are thus needed in the church today in order to expose the hypocrisy of traditional so-called ‘family values’, which upon closer reflection, turn out to be disturbingly anti-Christian. Authoritarian regimes from Hitler’s Germany to Putin’s Russia offer examples of how demonic ideologies can be cloaked in the garb of traditional family values — expressed in the Nazi slogan of *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* (Children-Kitchen-Church).²⁹ Tragically, we also witness how some Christians today can be deceived into supporting fascist populist parties because they pursue their dehumanising agendas under the banner of the promotion of ‘traditional values’.³⁰ This helps to explain why people who self-identify as evangelical Christians are disproportionately well represented in right-wing political organisations, such as the Republican Party in the USA, the UK Conservative Party, the UK Independence Party, and more extreme groups like Britain First and the British National Party.³¹ Similarly, some Christians can be duped into supporting authoritarian political regimes that purport to impose traditional ‘Christian’ morality by passing legislation that discriminates against homosexuals. Such legislation may have a thin veneer of Christianity, but in fact contravenes the gospel imperative of compassion, which upholds the dignity and sanctity of all people, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religion or sexuality.

‘Only a Suffering God Can Help Us Now’

As well as his world-affirming vision of Christianity, Bonhoeffer’s prophetic significance also consists in his radical reorientation of theology towards the suffering of God. This tendency had a long pedigree in German theology that stretched back to Martin Luther (1483–1546), who formulated a robust and influential ‘theology of the cross’ (*theologia crucis*),³² but Bonhoeffer revived this emphasis and gave it a powerful expression for the time of crisis

²⁸ Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead claim to have found that 81 percent of American evangelicals supported Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election and that 66 percent of Anglicans in the UK voted leave in the 2016 EU Referendum. See Smith and Woodhead, ‘Religion and Brexit: populism and the Church of England’, *Religion, State & Society*, 46 (2018): 206–223. For more on evangelicals’ support for the right-wing nativism of Donald Trump, see Ben Howe, *The Immoral Majority: Why Evangelicals Chose Political Power over Christian Values* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2019).

²⁹ Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918–2014: The Divided Nation* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 66.

³⁰ Searle, *Theology After Christendom*, p. 57.

³¹ On the UK context, see Andrea C. Hatcher, *Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), p. 180; on the link between evangelical beliefs and right-wing politics in the USA, see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), pp. 173–76.

³² Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1985).

in which he lived. Writing from his prison cell, where he was being held by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer famously claimed that ‘only a suffering God can help us now’.³³ To truly follow Christ meant incurring not reward, honour and success, but anxiety, solitude, shame and disgrace.³⁴

Bonhoeffer rejected the superficial triumphalism of official Christianity in Germany in the 1930s, which he associated with the vulgar worship of success that he regarded as one of the characteristics of the evil Nazi regime. Instead, he reinstated suffering, rather than triumphalism as the essence of the Christian life. In the *Ethics* Bonhoeffer wrote that

the cross is not random suffering, but necessary suffering. The cross is not suffering that stems from natural existence; it is suffering that comes from being Christian [...] A Christianity that no longer took discipleship seriously remade the gospel into a solace of cheap grace.³⁵

By demonstrating solidarity with the world in its suffering, Christian churches, as expressions of the *Communio Sanctorum* on Earth, can become a catalyst for humanising forces, such as compassion, dignity, respect and courtesy. Bonhoeffer teaches us that the global church needs a concentrated, focused and coordinated strategy to overcome the lies, deceit and inhumanity that characterises so much of our public life. Bonhoeffer realised long ago that meeting in church buildings on Sunday mornings and singing escapist songs that make vacuous professions of romantic love to Jesus will not change the world, but will merely produce cheap faith and perpetuate a religious subculture that widens the gulf between faith and life.³⁶

In the world today we are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of spiritual seekers, who are moved not by the propositional postulates of dogmatic theology, but by the spiritual reality of lived experience and transformed humanity.³⁷ As Harvey Cox puts it, ‘The experience of the divine is displacing theories about it.’³⁸ Organised forms of Christianity are declining. In the UK alone, hundreds of church buildings have been sold off and converted into carpet warehouses, apartment blocks, mosques, New Age centers, or even nightclubs.³⁹ The hierarchical structures of crumbling church institutions and educational establishments are

³³ Bonhoeffer, quoted in *Holocaust Theology: A Reader*, ed. by Dan Cohn-Sherbok (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 149.

³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 361.

³⁵ Bonhoeffer, quoted in Peter Frick, ‘The Imitatio Christi of Thomas à Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’, in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. by P. Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 31–52 (p. 43).

³⁶ Searle, *Theology After Christendom*, p. 38.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 506.

³⁸ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), p. 20.

³⁹ Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead, *That Was The Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016).

becoming more defective, dysfunctional and irrelevant in our contemporary post-Christian world, precisely as Bonhoeffer said they would.

Conclusion: The Coming of Age of Bonhoeffer's Prophetic Vision

For these reasons I am persuaded that Bonhoeffer's costly witness is as relevant and urgent now as it was at any time since the Nazi era. In today's world of Brexit, Putin, Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro, Erdogan and other populist 'strong men', fascism seems to be making a comeback. Fascism as a political ideology may have been universally discredited after 1945. Yet the spirit of fascism has been dormant and is now beginning to rise again as the catastrophes of the Second World War and the Holocaust recede further and further into the historical memory. Bonhoeffer's experience of the popular appeal of Nazism made him realise that democracy does not always harmonise with freedom. Under the spell of Nazism, the German masses had chosen to follow the Führer with absolute devotion. After the political chaos and economic disasters of the Weimar Republic, the mass of people cared not for constitutional liberty and abstract rights, but for material prosperity and a sense of restored national greatness. Therefore, when a fascist strongman, Adolf Hitler, emerged with a promise to 'make Germany great again', millions of Germans, including the vast majority of German Christians, supported him. If Bonhoeffer were here today, it seems that he would probably recognise our situation in which a global financial crisis has generated a resurgence of populist strongmen, whose promises to restore 'traditional family values' and 'national greatness', have gained mass support. Given these developments, Bonhoeffer would probably remark that the world today was living through a dangerous era of dehumanisation and God-forsakenness.

The signs of our present times indicate that the world is on the brink of a radical, revolutionary change. With the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020, it seems that we are witnessing the dawning of a new era in which there will not be a return to normality as we have known it, which brings huge opportunities for Christian witness to the world, but also many challenges. The universal impression is that the world is experiencing a time of momentous change and social upheaval. The consequences of these changes for Christian faith in the world are, as yet, unknowable. But what is clear is that spiritual values are disintegrating under the constant assault of powerful dehumanising forces in today's society. In this new authoritarian age, a new world is coming into being — a world that Bonhoeffer, with his first-hand experience of the Nazi regime would have recognised. This is a world that is moved not by the Christian values of love, compassion and

solidarity, but by power, by the racial politics of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil), and the demonic power of collective national identity and the media-fabricated ‘will of the people’.⁴⁰ It is imperative that Christ’s followers in the world today prepare for an enduring struggle in defence of gospel values, such as truth, freedom, dignity and compassion.

It has been observed that we are living in very harsh and vulgar times.⁴¹ Insensitivity, meaninglessness and a prevailing sense of nihilism have rendered people indifferent to human suffering. In the words of two leading sociologists, we are witnessing ‘unparalleled displays of human insensitivity’.⁴² Society is stuffed with useless, valueless information about the most banal superficialities, which denote the tedious triviality and emptiness of mass culture and fabricated moral sentiment. Politics, too, is undergoing a period of crisis. Instead of noble sentiments, authentic communication and substantive policies that promote justice and peace, politics today is pervaded by feeble banalities. Dead clichés are uttered from lifeless mouths for the purpose of verbal manipulation of gullible consumer-electories.

The devaluation of meaning and truth in political discourse is a disastrous phenomenon that goes largely unnoticed today. Politicians worry about the devaluation of currencies and stock markets; the devaluation of meaning and truth seems not to trouble them. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that politics today is usually conducted under the banner of economics. Economic interests usually determine the ideologies of political parties and their policies. Under the domination of economics, the aspirational horizons of many politicians seem hardly to extend beyond the everlasting aggrandisement of GDP, regardless of the human and ecological costs. Yet the devaluation of reality incurs incalculable penalties. In an age of global pandemics, the degradation of the natural world through human exploitation,⁴³ and the growing appeal of populist demagogues throughout the world, the crisis assumes a spiritual, as well as a social and economic character.

We can only speculate what Bonhoeffer would make of all this, but I think he would say that the signs of the times betoken a crisis of compassion and the commencement of a new faithless age in which people have lost

⁴⁰ Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017), p. 17.

⁴¹ Leading sociologists the late Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis refer to the early twenty-first century as an ‘age of modern barbarism’. See Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 139.

⁴² Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, p. 11.

⁴³ Bonhoeffer’s theology has significant implications for contemporary environmental ethics, as Steven C. van den Heuvel argues in his book, *Bonhoeffer’s Christocentric Theology and Fundamental Debates in Environmental Ethics*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

reliable criteria for distinguishing between love and hate, freedom and slavery, and truth and falsehood. Bonhoeffer's legacy gives us a shining example of how to follow Christ in dark times. Bonhoeffer's theology of solidarity and his insistence on the need for Christianity to extend beyond matters of personal piety has important implications for Christians today. For Bonhoeffer, Christian engagement with politics assumes the form of spiritual warfare and the casting down of strongholds through prophetic engagement with the *archai kai exousiai* (powers and principalities — Ephesians 6:12) which enslave and denigrate people. I think Bonhoeffer would challenge Christians today to face up fearlessly to the challenges of living in a 'post-truth' age in which deceitful politicians present their media-spun fabrications as 'alternative facts'.⁴⁴ To put it more positively, for Christians the goal of prophetic engagement with politics is to humanise the public space by upholding spiritual values of truth, integrity and solidarity. For Christians, such engagement is both a political mandate and a gospel-spiritual imperative.

To read the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is to be reminded of the gulf that exists between the prophetic-spiritual dynamism of the gospel message on the one hand, and the moribund institutionalism of many churches on the other. Bonhoeffer's writings contain the seeds of a new kind of Christianity that is radically orientated towards the world and which expresses the saving power of the gospel in the midst of the world in all its brokenness and sin. The world still awaits the emergence of Christianity not as a religion of private salvation, but as a gospel movement of universal, creative compassion.⁴⁵ This is a gospel that does not separate itself from the world, but expresses indefatigable solidarity with the world in its fallenness and suffering. My hope is that we can learn from Bonhoeffer in order to envision Christianity in precisely these terms.

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⁴⁴ Matthew d'Ancona, *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (London: Penguin, 2017).

⁴⁵ For more on this theme, see Joshua T. Searle, *Theology after Christendom: Forming Prophets for Mission in a Post-Christian World* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018).