

## The Mystery of God Terry Tastard

### Introduction

In October 1936 Dietrich Bonhoeffer received a letter from Karl Barth. Barth been alarmed by reading Eberhard Bethge's enthusiastic account of the practice of meditative prayer at Finkenwalde, the seminary set up by the Confessing Church with Bonhoeffer as its principal. Barth wrote anxiously: "I read (the report) with care, but I cannot honestly say that I felt very happy with this thing ... I am disturbed by an indefinable odour of the eros and pathos of the cloister" (Bosanquet, p.159).

Barth's antipathy is not surprising. As a son of the German Reformation, he had been influenced by its hostility towards any suggestion that life in a religious community afforded a higher road to holiness than life in the everyday world. Moreover, in Barth's own theological system grace is a divine gift and not a human achievement. Still, on a moment's reflection we would realise that much of the same could be said about Bonhoeffer himself. So this underlines the sheer newness, in the 1930s, of what Bonhoeffer was attempting at Finkenwalde. It was very unusual for anyone of his background to explore meditative prayer within the shared discipline of community life. Yet this is what Bonhoeffer set out to do, and it linked up with a gathering stream of spiritual development within him.

Any talk of Bonhoeffer's path of conversion is almost a contradiction in terms, because his whole life was a life of metanoia, a life lived in openness to God in Christ. In the intelligent, lively Bonhoeffer family circle, the children were brought up to regard it as positively sinful ever to use an empty phrase (Bosanquet, p.28). From an early age he was used to searching heart and conscience, testing them against scripture. In his own daily living, as in his preaching, he sought to stand under the cross and to find that its shadow turned all wordly glory to dust. But much of this could be said about many other German Christians from the professional classes. In their case, time after time, their formation led to an ethic of duty which paralysed them. This is acknowledged by Bonhoeffer (LPP, p.64). In the famous excoriating pages of his *New Year Reckoning*, 1943, he writes that the historical German reverence towards duty, seen as freeing people from self-will, has had fatal consequences. The German, he writes, 'could not see the need for free and responsible action ... in its place there appeared on the one hand an irresponsible lack of scruple, and on the other a self-tormenting punctiliousness that never led to action' (LPP, p.6). In his anguish Bonhoeffer may be unconsciously parodying his own people. Recent revelations about the Channel Islands under German occupation may make us ask whether the British would have been, in the event of occupation, as unwilling to collude as we like to think.

But still: the fact remains that Bonhoeffer was himself an example of free and responsible action, at great cost and against the tidal pull of the times. Reaching this position was a gradual process, a journey which led him to compromise himself in the resistance against Hitler. Unravelling why and how he grew to be the person he was is obviously beyond one paper. But I can highlight one factor which I think is underestimated, and that is the importance of Bonhoeffer's time at Finkenwalde. Here, I believe, he moved into a crucial phase in linking the inner and outer worlds, faith and action. It was the experience of prayer within a spiritually disciplined religious community of mutual support and encouragement that helped him to find the freedom to risk everything.

### 1. The setting up of Finkenwalde

When Hitler came to power in 1933 the Nazi party began to extend its control systematically over each area of national life. The Protestant Churches were reshaped around a Reichsbishop, Ludwig Muller, and a good deal of the administration passed into the hands of so-called German Christians. These co-operated in attempts by the state to exclude from church office any person of Jewish descent. Some went further, and sought a re-writing of Christian doctrine which freed it of alleged distortions deriving from the Jewish Old Testament and the Jew, Paul. It was emphasised, too, that Christian duty required Germans to serve the national renewal under the Fuhrer. Against these German Christians a group who eventually called themselves the Confessing Church coalesced around Niemoller, Bonhoeffer, Barth and others. With most of the funds, property and administration of the Protestant churches in the hands of committees run by German Christians, the Confessing Church had to struggle to survive. It set up three seminaries and had control of two others, where young men were prepared for ministry in the Confessing Church. The seminary in Pomerania was placed under Bonhoeffer. After opening at Zingst in April 1935 it moved shortly afterwards to Finkenwalde. It housed and trained 24 students for each course, until it was closed by the Gestapo in September 1937. Even then the training still continued until 1940, in smaller, dispersed groups. The seminary was also a centre of encouragement for the network of Confessing Church pastors, keeping them in touch through newsletters and conferences.

Much of the course work at the seminary was traditional: a great stress, as we might expect, on homiletics and biblical study, as well as on pastoral care, and the theology of the church. Bonhoeffer, however, introduced something which was radically new, which went completely against the grain of tradition and which at first astounded the students. Gently, but insistently, he asked them to live under the discipline of daily meditative prayer. Each morning, after breakfast, they were to meditate in silence for half an hour on a few scriptural verses which had been agreed on in advance. He left it up to the students how they were to do this. At first he met considerable resistance both inside and outside the seminary. Such a practice smacked of Catholic monkish practices. Some of the students felt at a

loss. Some students who persevered complained that other students had been smoking pipes during meditation, but Bonhoeffer thought this a good thing. As word got around the Confessing Church, there were accusations that Bonhoeffer was encouraging a hothouse atmosphere. But, inspired by his example, and gradually seeing that such prayer played a central role in his life, the students persevered. Bethge comments: 'Some continued to practice it long after leaving Finkenwalde ... the circular letter sent out to all Finkenwaldians would contain the weekly texts for meditation and sometimes also an exhortation that they should not abandon so salutary a practice' (p.382).

## 2. Meditative Prayer in the Life of Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was always a serious person, a scrupulous person perhaps. His family was not churchgoing, and his decision, in his teenage years, to become a pastor and theologian, had to be maintained in the face of their initial opposition (Bethge, pp.20-27). Perhaps it was this that gave him an early impetus towards that secret prayer, where the seeker goes into his chamber and shuts the door. Certainly by the time he took up his first appointment, as assistant pastor to the German Lutheran congregation at Barcelona in 1928, we find that he is already speaking of prayer as a discipline. In a sermon of that year he uses remarkable language, remarkable in the way that he is unconsciously taking themes familiar to the mystical tradition: prayer as an arcane language, as abandonment, as a journey into the depths of oneself and of God at the same time. He says: "We have to learn the language of God, learn it with effort, we must work at it ... prayer too must be practised as part of our work." Here he adds a judicious note of discernment: "It is a grave and fatal mistake if one confuses religion with a heightening of the feelings." A little later, he exhorts his listeners each day to 'let the silence gather round him, to stand in the presence of eternity and let it speak, to enquire from it about our condition, and to gaze deep into himself and far out, beyond and above. It may be done by taking up a few words from the Bible; but the best is to abandon oneself completely and let the soul find its way to its Father's house' (Bosanquet, pp.70-71).

In this revealing sermon, there are elements of both contemplative and meditative prayer. It seems, however, that Bonhoeffer increasingly focussed on scriptural meditation, and found it a source of liberating energy that flowed into his everyday life. He brought together the traditional Lutheran emphasis of sola scriptura and a catholic sense of prayer as a daily waiting on God in openness of heart. In a letter to his brother-in-law Rudiger Schleicher he wrote: 'One cannot simply read the Bible like other books. One must be prepared really to enquire of it. Only thus will it reveal itself ... just as we do not grasp the words of someone we love by taking them to bits, but by simply receiving them, so that for days they go on lingering in our minds, simply because they are the words of a person we love; and just as these words reveal more and more of the person who said them, as we go on, like Mary, "pondering them in our heart", so it will be with the Bible ... I consider a text which I have chosen for the whole week, and

try to sink deeply into it, so as really to hear what it is saying,' And he adds: 'I know that without this I could not live properly any longer' (Bosanquet, pp.109-110).

## 3. Bonhoeffer's prayer within the mystical tradition

This was the prayer life that Bonhoeffer himself practised. This was what he took with him to life at Finkenwalde. I would suggest that during this time, his prayer life immeasurably deepened. Remember, too, that during this time the Confessing Church was being increasingly harassed: pastors were beaten up on the streets, placed under surveillance or imprisoned. They faced a difficult struggle to make ends met financially. Not only did Bonhoeffer's prayer deepen: his meditation led him increasingly towards the suffering Christ, and to an awareness that Christian faith and witness in Germany called him and others to a sharing in Christ's suffering. While at Finkenwalde he wrote much of his book The Cost of Discipleship, the title of which alone is suggestive. The book's antithesis between cheap and costly grace is well known. However, it is the final chapter which I find particularly interesting. This chapter is entitled, 'The Image of Christ', and here Bonhoeffer finds himself drawn to those scriptural passages which deal with humankind made in the image of God, passages which fascinated the mystics. He writes, 'The image of Jesus Christ impresses itself in daily communion on the image of the disciple. No follower of Jesus can contemplate his image in a spirit of cold detachment. That image has the power to transform our lives, and if we surrender ourselves utterly to him, we cannot help bearing his image within us' (CD, p. 337). There are, of course, many images of Christ: in glory, as judge, as Lord, as teacher. But Bonhoeffer focusses on 'the image of one who enters a world of sin and death, who takes upon himself all the sorrows of humanity, who meekly bears God's wrath and judgement against sinners, and obeys his will with unswerving devotion in suffering and death, the man born to poverty ... the Man of sorrows, rejected of man and forsaken of God. Here is God made man, here is man in the new image of God.'

Here, I think, we find Bonhoeffer's life of prayer and knowledge of the world drawing together. In his meditation it seems to have been increasingly the suffering Christ that he was drawn to, the image that hung before his eyes, whose words he turned over again and again in this heart. And it was this image that made most sense in terms of the suffering and evil that he saw in Germany around him. The indwelling Christ, whose face we seek and whose image we bear, is the crucified one who shoulders the full weight of human suffering. And so, says Bonhoeffer, communion with Christ in prayer is not a private experience. He insists, rather, that the presence of Christ as the divine image among us calls on us to recognise Christ's presence in each person, especially among the suffering: 'Any attack even on the least of men is an attack on Christ, who took the form of man ... Through fellowship and communion with the Incarnate Lord, we recover our true humanity, and at the same time we are

delivered from that individualism which is the consequence of sin, and retrieve our solidarity with the whole human race' (CD, p. 341). So I want to suggest that it was the suffering Christ on whom he was increasingly focussing at Finkenwalde.

In The Cost of Discipleship we catch a glimpse of how it is Christ poor and weak, Christ prepared to embrace suffering, who has been uppermost on Bonhoeffer's prayer of silence and reflection. It is this Christ who has been calling him to follow him in sharing the sufferings of others. Prayer and intellect, faith and action, are becoming fused into one. He is saying that to be formed in Christ, is to be prepared to share in his sufferings; and to share in his sufferings is to move out of self-centredness, to stand alongside those in whom Christ suffers today. Bonhoeffer, in his account of meditation, had written with Bethge that 'We want to meet Christ in his Word (...) Do not look for new thoughts and connections in the text, as you would if you were preaching! Do not ask, "How shall I pass this on?" but, "What does it say to me?" Then ponder this Word long in your heart until it has gone right into you and taken possession of you' (WF, pp. 58 - 59). Note this 'take possession of you'. His prayer is something which unites him with Christ, rather in the Pauline tradition: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal, 2.20). Bonhoeffer, in his meditation, drew steadily closer to the crucified Christ revealed afresh among the suffering of the world.

The question naturally arises as to how, then, a man who plotted with others for the death of his head of state could be said to be one whose spirituality was centred on the cross. The question is made more acute by the fact that in The Cost of Discipleship he wrestles with the concept of non-resistance to evil, saying 'Evil becomes a spent force when we put up no resistance' (p. 158) (relating to Matt. 5.38-42). But he is clearly uneasy with the idea, and his position is not very clear. I want to suggest that for Bonhoeffer, entering into illegality was a sharing in the poverty and vulnerability of the Christ on whom he meditated. The way of the cross was the way of resistance, because this was the way of risk and the way of suffering. Time and again he sees Christ as the one who goes to the cross for us, who suffers the consequences of sin on our behalf; so, too, I would suggest, for Bonhoeffer, to speak and act for others requires a preparedness to compromise. This was what drew him back to Germany from America: he had to share the guilt of his people, just as Christ in the cross entered into the guilt of the human race.

And I repeat, the time of prayerful discipline at Finkenwalde was actually crucial for him in this respect. We are so familiar with his participation in the Abwehr cabal that we forget that it was actually at Finkenwalde that Bonhoeffer and the others slipped over into illegality and began the lonely path of conscientious resistance. In December 1935 the government made it illegal for evangelical Christians to form associations or groups outside the established church. Raising of funds by collections and subscriptions was also prohibited, as was the conferring of offices within such church groups. It was forbidden to duplicate

circulated letters. The Confessing Church was torn over whether to conform or to resist; Bonhoeffer, and Finkenwalde, encouraged everybody towards disobedience (Bethge, 414). It soon became impossible to serve the Confessing Church while remaining within the law (Bethge, 484). Before going to Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer had written 'The restoration of the Church must surely come from a new kind of monasticism ... a life lived without compromise according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Jesus' (Bosanquet, p.150). At Finkenwalde he began to live this out in earnest.

#### 4. Life on the margins

Finkenwalde was at the heart of the struggle for the soul of the German Evangelical Church. Yet, it is also clear that life at Finkenwalde was life on the margins. This was even the case geographically: Pomerania was then on the edge of Prussia, a quiet rural backwater. It was certainly the case socially. Bonhoeffer had moved from being a respected German lecturer to directing a small graduate school of no formal standing. He had once been invited to preach on Reformation Sunday in front of the Chancellor in Berlin's greatest church. Now he and his students aroused suspicion and resentment among the hierarchy, and found themselves ministering to a faithful remnant. They were on the margin. But it freed him: it freed him to pray, to question, and to seek.

Thomas Merton would have seen this as entirely proper. For him, the monk was precisely one who lived on the margins of the world. This was not always how Merton saw it, however. The man who joined the Cistercians in 1941 was joining one of the most complete and all-encompassing ways of life open to a person. To become a Cistercian was to join a group of people who accounted for every minute of every day. Life was austere, severe even. The Abbey at Gethsemani had been founded from France and although it was now thoroughly American, it had never shaken off the French connection. There tended to be a feeling among American monks that the touchstone of Cistercian orthodoxy was lived in France, and that they could only measure up to it by being more strict at everything than the French. It was very much a life of penance. Moreover, the 1950s were the most intense years of the Cold War, when the Catholic Church had a strong sense of itself as fighting communism.

In this era, the enclosed life was sometimes depicted rather like a factory. By their prayers, their sacrifices, their austerities, monks and nuns won grace for the world. The greater their heroism, the more grace poured into the world. So Merton, a few years after joining Gethsemani, could write: 'This church, this court of the Queen of Heaven, is the real capital of the country in which we are living. This is the centre of all the vitality that is in America ... These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir ... are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God' (SSM, p.325). If we shorthanded



Merton, we could say that the abbey church is a way of God blessing America. Compare this with Merton 20 years later: 'It is a distortion of the contemplative life to treat it as if the contemplative concentrated all his efforts on getting graces and favours from God for others and for himself' (CWA, p.159).

Clearly, Merton had been on a journey. He had promised conversion of his life, conversatio morum, on becoming a Cistercian. It had led him down ways he could never have anticipated. Many factors had contributed to this change. After the publication of his autobiography The Seven Storey Mountain he had been inundated with letters, which in some ways brought him closer in touch with the world than he had been outside it. Many people he wrote to became friends and visited him. Then there was his poetry, which allowed him to express his sense of the ambiguity of life. Psychotherapy helped. But we can probably identify two turning-points in particular, his sudden experience of enlightenment in 1958, and his move to the hermitage.

On 18 March 1958, in the prosaic shopping area of downtown Louisville, Merton suddenly had what we have to call a mystical experience. Looking at the people going about their everyday business, he suddenly realized that he loved them, that they belonged to him and he to them. Moreover, he saw, as it were, the spark of divinity in each of these persons. 'It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts ... the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes' (CGB, p.158). If only, he thought, people could see each other like that, all hatred and war would vanish. Another conclusion struck home: 'The gate of heaven is everywhere' he wrote after this experience (CGB, p.158). He could no longer believe in a separate world of renunciation and supposed holiness. Everybody was holy, for everybody belonged to God; what was different about monks was that they were conscious of this and made a profession out of it. This did not mean that they were holier (CGB, pp.156-7). This was a turning-point for Merton. It did not lead him away from the abbey. It did, though, lead him to conclude that his solitude was no longer his own. It belonged to the world, and his duty was to help those who read him or listened to him to awake to the beauty within them, where God shone like the sun.

From this date we can detect a gradual quickening of his interest in all that disfigures human life. He is particularly horrified by war. In America there was paranoia about communism, and the unthinking patriotism of the times did much to feed war rhetoric. By 1961 Merton was afraid that this rising tide could flood into actual war. He sent Dorothy Day a poem for publication in the Catholic Worker and asked her: 'Why this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, laypeople on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends' (HGL, p.139). The prose poem was 'Chant to be used in processions around a site with furnaces' and its shock value was strong. The poem reads in the first person, like a droning monotone, and focuses on the severing of feeling and killing. One part reads: 'I was born

into a Catholic family but as these people were not going to need a priest I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many' (TMR, p.357). The machine, of course, was the gas chamber. But by implication it was also American technology being exploited for possible mass destruction. From this date onwards, poems and essays appeared frequently about war, but also about poverty and racism. Many inside and outside the church were astounded. Vatican II had yet to happen. The Catholic Church, especially in America, had a reputation for piety, for devotionism, for a knee-jerk anti-communism, but not for prophecy. Shannon says simply that Merton was the first monk to speak out. It seems to have been the compassion that stayed with him from the experience of enlightenment in 1958 that pushed him into this.

But above all it seemed to be the last three years of his life, his time in the hermitage, which allowed Merton to flower. For some time he had been finding life in the monastery increasingly constrictive. In particular, the regimentation and uniformity of prayer was a problem for him. He once wrote: 'It is in choir that the monk often feels himself most completely depersonalised, most totally subject to overcontrol, most thoroughly alienated' (CWA, p.76). By contrast, he delighted in the silence, the solitude, the closeness to nature of his hermitage. 'Up here in the woods' he wrote, 'is seen the New Testament: that is to say the wind comes through the trees and you breathe' (SL, p.251 from DS). In part, this time in the hermitage was for him the equivalent of Bonhoeffer's time at Finkenwalde: a space both geographically and socially in the margins, which allowed him freedom to search in reading, thinking, and praying. It encapsulated much that had been going on within him for several years.

## 5. Merton on Identity

Bit by bit Merton had been drawn to ask who he was. The question of identity is one of the commonest themes in the last 10 years of Merton's writing. His occasional wrestling with spiritual aridity had led him to question identity. So, too, did his growing doubts about the gung-ho regimentation that marked preconciliar Cistercian life. He had been allowed extensive privileges to write and to keep in touch with current developments in culture, partly because the abbey needed the income from his royalties. This knowledge of what was going on beyond the abbey walls helped make him a thoughtful and well-informed critic of monasticism. In questioning identity, though, he found himself questioning not only himself and the monastic life but also the world's comfortable assumptions.

It was mystical theology that helped unbind Merton. On the one hand mysticism speaks of an experience of God so powerful that his reality, love and presence in the world are known beyond doubt. On the other hand, this experience is also of God as unknown: God who is beyond human definition and who eludes human grasp. As part of his monastic formation, Merton acquired a basic knowledge of patristic and other writings on mysticism. When he himself was teaching as novice master he expanded his knowledge by a typically vast and sustained

programme of reading. He reached out to include mystical experience of other religions. John of the Cross, Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux were early grist to this mill, but his study expanded to include Zen, Taoism, Hassidism and Sufism. He discovered the frightening truth that we both know and do not know God. This God, at once familiar and unknown, is the God whose image we carry within us.

Merton writes: 'God is invisibly present to the ground of our being: our belief and love attain to him, but he remains hidden from the arrogant gaze of our investigating mind which seeks to capture him and secure permanent possession of him in an act of knowledge that gives power over him. It is he seized and comprehended by our minds ... Instead we know him in so far as we become aware of ourselves as known through and through by him. We "possess" him in proportion as we realise ourselves to be possessed by him in the inmost depths of our being' (CP, p.103).

Merton's own journey was one in which the silence and solitude increasingly revealed to him that God was always in some way beyond us. Yet the confidence of 20th century culture, its belief in its own power to solve all problems, its faith in progress, all helped to create an illusion in which people lived on the surface of reality. He wrote in his journal, 'man, thinking of himself secretly as a completely free autonomous self, with unlimited possibilities .... finds himself in an impossible predicament. He is "as a god" and therefore everything is within reach. But it turns out that all that he can successfully reach by his own volition is not quite work having. What he really seeks and needs - love, an authentic identity, a life that has meaning cannot be had simply by willing and by taking steps to procure them ... The things we really need come to us only as gifts, and in order to receive them as gifts we have to renounce ourselves, in a sense we have to die to our image of ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation upon our self-willed identity' (CGB, p.224). Here I think Merton strikes a note which resonates even more strongly in our own day (although I would add in parenthesis that we might want to question to which extent he speaks out of male experience and to what extent out of human experience).

When Merton entered Gethsemani he believed that he was taking on a new identity. But he came to see that this identity simply evaded confrontation with God who questioned us, who challenged our assumptions and self-centredness. When he entered Gethsemani he believed that he had left the world behind. By the time he moved into the hermitage he felt on the contrary that the monk was both on the margins and at the centre of life. On the margins, seeking freedom from the illusions pushed at us by the predominant culture of our times, illusion that we seize as we fashion a comfortable self-understanding. At the centre, because the monk is really no different from others in struggling with selfishness and shallowness. At the centre, to, because in the silence the monk should be

listening not only to God but to the world in its confused searching and to those voices so easily overlooked by the dominant culture.

This is where we need to read Bonhoeffer in one hand and Merton in the other. In the last year of his life, in prison, Bonhoeffer came to feel that there were dangers in what he wrote in The Cost of Discipleship. He had felt then that faith could grow through living a holy life. While he stood by what he wrote in the book, he now felt that only by living completely in the world could one have faith. And he adds: 'One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous one, a sick man or an unhealthy one. By this worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and complexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world - watching with Christ in Gethsemani. That, I think, is faith; that is metanoia; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian ... how can success make us arrogant, or failure lead us astray, when we share in God's sufferings through a life of this kind?' (LPP, pp.369-70).

With much of this Merton would have been in agreement. Part of his conversion was coming to see precisely what Bonhoeffer saw, that it is impossible to cultivate our souls in isolation from others or from the world. But Merton, I think, would have been more aware of the endless human tendency to remake God in our own image. For example, in the 1960s so much use was made of Bonhoeffer's concept of religionless Christianity, because, I suspect, it fitted in with the expansive confidence of the era; by comparison little was made of Bonhoeffer's accompanying insistence that Christians should lead a secret discipline of prayer. Merton reminds us, too, that prayer itself is problematical since it links so closely to our image of God and ourselves. So it is not, in the end, selfish of us to hope that Bonhoeffer's accessible lively life of prayer as lived at Finkenwalde should extend its possibilities of silence and solitude, of listening and waiting, in so far as we live it today. Shortly before his death, Merton wrote, 'The contemplative life must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choice - beyond routine choice - become manifest. It should create a new experience of time ... rooted in the sense of common illusion and in criticism of it' (AJ, p.117). So much spirituality today is concerned with fulfilment or with power. In this situation Merton asks us where, in our prayer, do we meet the mystery of God who leads us beyond convention, beyond stereotypes, to a new awareness. In this situation Bonhoeffer asks us where our prayer leads us to plunge into the needs of the world; he asks us, where is the cost of your faith, where do you suffer through solidarity with Christ in the suffering of the world? Both men asked themselves these questions on their journeys of conversion. They ask them still of us today.

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