

Finkenwalde and Harnack's influence in Bonhoeffer's call for a "New Monasticism"

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Abstract

The objective of the article is to briefly look into the thoughts stemming from the period in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood at the forefront of the illegal seminary run by the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde (from 1935 to 1937) and also to verify the hypothesis that his call for "new monasticism" was influenced by the ideas of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) on Christian asceticism and monasticism. Bonhoeffer made this call in one of his letters shortly before he became the head of the Finkenwalde seminary where he emphasized life in community and deep spiritual formation in addition to consistent theological education. Harnack considered the absence of monasticism "in the evangelical sense of the word" a fundamental deficiency in Protestantism. The article validates that the examination of the common themes of these two authors about monasticism contributes to a deeper understanding of Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde theology.

Keywords

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Adolf von Harnack; Finkenwalde; Monasticism; Asceticism

Introduction

The Bonhoeffer scholarship of more than seventy years now seems to be facing another task. On one side, it wants to reveal the more precise context of Bonhoeffer's voluminous writings¹ and so better understand his legacy, but at the same time it also wants to deepen the knowledge

1 The sixteen volumes of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English (DBWE)* series contain more than nine thousand pages, cf. Frick (2017: 48).

about this thinker, which often ends with the impressive personal story culminating in martyrdom. The popular portrait of a martyr, or even a saint, fighting against Hitler and national socialism, has sometimes seemed to overshadow Bonhoeffer's real theological influence.² Paradoxically, the current scholarship, which considers his prison ideas as the pinnacle of Bonhoeffer's theology, perhaps somewhat contributes to this fascination of Bonhoeffer's last days.

This contribution is a part of the author's prepared dissertation, which seeks a closer examination of the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the time he stood at the forefront of the illegal seminary run by the Confessing Church at Finkenwalde (from 1935 to 1937). As Peter Frick writes in his book *Understanding Bonhoeffer* (2017), the material stemming from the Finkenwalde period that is overlooked by current scholarship can broaden a new perspective on Bonhoeffer's theology and play a decisive and formative role in Bonhoeffer's later prison theology.³ Since this is a very extensive issue, the article aims to provide a glimpse into Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde world of thought, and also seeks to verify the assumption that Bonhoeffer's call for "new monasticism", often mentioned in connection with the establishment and mission of the Finkenwalde seminary, could have been influenced by the ideas of the church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). This teacher of Bonhoeffer in Berlin focused on asceticism, monasticism and the life dedicated to God in his book *Das Mönchtum: Seine Ideale und seine Geschichte* (Monasticism: Its Ideals and History) and later in what is arguably his most discussed work, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (What is Christianity), which is based on a stenographic record of his lectures. Harnack considered the absence of monasticism in Protestantism to be one of its fundamental deficiencies, which allegedly led to the deprivation of true thinkers (cf. Vogel 2012:86, 92). If the outlined hypothesis proves to be relevant, this article can supplement newer studies dealing with the Finkenwalde period, which however do not deal with Harnack's influence in connection with Bonhoeffer's words about monasticism. Nevertheless,

2 Cf. Clifford Green's foreword to DeJonge (2018: xiii–xvi).

3 Frick believes that the closer examination of this period poses a big challenge to Bonhoeffer scholarship nowadays. He argues that the material written down in this period, amounting to some 22% of all of the text included in *DBWE* series, has so far received a very negligible attention. Cf. Frick (2017:47–48).

as their conclusions are important for our topic, two of them will be briefly presented here as well. But first, Bonhoeffer's words about monasticism will be introduced in more detail.

Finkenwalde and Monasticism

A few months before Bonhoeffer finally decided to return from London to Germany, in a letter to his friend Erwin Sutz, he mentions the possibilities that opened up to him – to go back as director of a soon-opening preachers' seminary, to stay in England, or to go to India.⁴ He also shares with Sutz his disillusionment about the university as a place to pass on the most important skills and thoughts to the next generation of pastors. He reflects on their training in church-monastic schools where, unlike the university, the pure doctrine, the Sermon on the Mount, and worship will be taken seriously (cf. Bonhoeffer 2013:217). Bonhoeffer felt that he faced a task that required more than just imparting expertise in theology. In addition to disciplined theological teaching and academic work, the seminary should also provide a consistent spiritual formation of future church leaders – including prayer, worship, and direct encounter with God's word.⁵ In a letter addressed to his brother Karl Friedrich, which he wrote before he took up the position in the seminary, he wrote: "The restoration of the church must surely depend on a *new kind of monasticism*, which has nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising discipleship, following Christ according to the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the time has come to gather people together and do this" (Bonhoeffer 2013:285). It is precisely from here that the words of "new monasticism" are often quoted, preceded by Bonhoeffer's naming of a change in his approach to theology. Theology used to be much more academic for him, but now it is something very different. For the first time in his life, he believes he is on the right track in recognizing the seriousness of the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Bonhoeffer 2013:285).

4 Renate Wind explains Bonhoeffer's interest in India based on hearing the daughter of the English Admiral Madeline Slade, who became Gandhi's collaborator, speak about an alternative way of life she found in India – life without property, without violence, and the resulting non-violent resistance. Bonhoeffer wanted to get acquainted with Gandhi's methods. Cf. Wind (2014:80).

5 Cf. H. Gaylon Barker's foreword to Bonhoeffer (2013:18).

Despite the ban on all preaching seminaries in Old Prussia, which was ordered by the Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller with Hitler's support, Bonhoeffer was commissioned to lead the seminary from January 1935. The first seminary course directed by Bonhoeffer took place at Zingsthoof. After two months, the seminary moved to an estate at Finkenwalde, a neighbourhood in the city of Stettin (now Szczecin in modern-day Poland), which provided a base for the seminary until its closure by the Gestapo in late September 1937. The seminary life was determined by Bonhoeffer's concept of the Christian community. As the director, he was the author of the Finkenwalde curriculum and the daily life schedule in which students were formed, educated, and prepared for preaching in the church. H. Gaylon Barker recalls Bonhoeffer's definition of the meaning of Finkenwalde in these words: "Finkenwalde was never meant to be an experiment that turned its back on the world but rather was a place of preparation to serve the world; 'the goal was not monastic isolation but rather the most intensive concentration for ministry to the world'" (Barker 2013:19–20).

During the Finkenwalde years Bonhoeffer wrote two of his classics – *Discipleship* and *Life Together*. They faithfully reflect the spirit that is evident from those as mentioned earlier and other Bonhoeffer's letters and shorter texts from that time. Both writings are less academic in their language as they go to the heart. They highlight the importance of communion, ministry, confession, and the Lord's Supper. Within the church they are critical, warning of the temptations which the church has been subject to, calling for action and a true discipleship according to the Sermon on the Mount. They move away from the academic context, abstract argumentation, and philosophical jargon of Bonhoeffer's earlier works, naming more concrete problems, and the pastoral and spiritual tone carries both works more (cf. DeJonge 2018:13).

The uniqueness of the book *Life Together* lies not only in the insight into Bonhoeffer's ideas concerning the basic principles of life in a community of Christians living together, but also in the fact that its reflections grow from Bonhoeffer's own experience of everyday faith within the Finkenwalde community. For Bonhoeffer, living together in the community of the body of Christ is determined primarily by serving the community, the centre of which is the present Christ (cf. Valčo & Valčová 2015:83). And so, he

gradually recalls the importance and need of common life, speaks of worship, reading from the Scriptures (especially the Psalms) and offering prayers. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of solitude, silence, service, the ability to listen, forgiveness, confession, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.⁶

The book *Discipleship* is based on Bonhoeffer's often repeated calls to interpret and take Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seriously, and here we can also find some more coherent expressions about monasticism. They are framed by the theme of "costly" grace, which has become "cheap" with the gradual spread of Christianity and the increasing secularization of the church. Bonhoeffer finds the remainder of its original value and significance in the time of the Roman Church in monasticism, which lived on its edge by knowing that grace is not cheap and leads to true discipleship: "People left everything they had for the sake of Christ and tried to follow Jesus' strict commandments through daily exercise. Monastic life thus became a living protest against the secularization of Christianity, against the cheapening of grace" (Bonhoeffer 2013:46–47).

However, according to Bonhoeffer, the monastic way of life has become an extraordinary performance of individuals that most people in the church did not achieve, and thus began to distinguish "the highest and lowest performance in Christian obedience" (cf. Bonhoeffer 2003:47). In addition to the monastic journey, there was another, easier way of life in the church. Bonhoeffer sees this promotion to extraordinary performance and, furthermore, small groups of people, a significant deviation from Christianity, and a major offense to monasticism, which has been recognized as being of particular merit. Martin Luther, who was originally an Augustinian monk, becomes a model on the path of faithful discipleship not for his merit but for the grace of God. On Luther's decision to leave the monastery Bonhoeffer adds:

6 Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson point out that *Life Together* reprises many of the themes on the nature of the church, which Bonhoeffer already enunciated in his earlier dissertation *Sanctorum Communio*, but in a more lucid language shorn of the ponderous and heavily footnoted analyses of the dissertation (cf. Kelly & Nelson 2003: 159).

Luther had to leave the monastery and re-enter the world, not because the world itself was good and holy, but because even the monastery was nothing else but world. Luther's path out of the monastery back to the world meant the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity. The rejection which the monk had given the world was child's play compared to the rejection that the world endured through his returning to it. This time the attack was a frontal assault. Following Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world. What had been practiced in the special, easier circumstances of monastic life as a special accomplishment now had become what was necessary and commanded for every Christian in the world. (Bonhoeffer 2013:48)

It was Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's biographer, and friend, but also one of the Finkenwalde students at the time, who gave us a deeper understanding of the various factors that shaped Bonhoeffer's thinking and led to Bonhoeffer's role in the Finkenwalde community. An important source is the Alden-Tuthill Lectures, which Bethge gave at the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1961. These lectures provide the framework within which Bethge interpreted Bonhoeffer. They also demonstrate Bethge's consummate skill in giving structure and form to Bonhoeffer's theology (Gruchy 2007:358) and offer a more nuanced distinction of the interrelationship between Bonhoeffer's three theological phases. Bethge addresses the Finkenwalde period in a lecture entitled *The Second Period ("Concentration")*, which covers the period 1933–1940. Bethge recalls here that Bonhoeffer had been thinking about the small community for many years, but nobody in German Lutheranism at that time had dared to think of a *vita communis*. According to his perception, there are four driving influences that contributed to the experiment. First, since about 1932 Bonhoeffer had himself practiced daily meditation on a Scripture passage. He also refers to his first attempts with the Sermon on the Mount as "spiritual exercises". We agree with Geoffrey Kelly, who considers the Sermon on the Mount to be a key element of the entire daily routine (including common prayers, meditation, Scripture reading and reflection,

fraternal ministry, and Bonhoeffer's lectures).⁷ Second, the interest in the community was closely linked to his invitation to go to India and to get acquainted with Gandhi's methods. Bonhoeffer sometimes calls his idea for a *vita communis* a "Christian settlement". Third, the establishment of the new Anglican monasteries of the nineteenth century in Britain led him to gather new impulses for his understanding of order of daily life and prayer. Fourth, the unfolding events in Germany served to advance his objectives in advocating for a transformation in the education of ministers. Bonhoeffer harboured persistent concerns about the appropriateness of his intellectually centred educational approach, which lacked a connection to spiritual education and discipline (Bethge 1961:22).

The insight into the world of thought of Bonhoeffer's theology of the Finkenwalde period outlined above provided the ground for later reflections connected with Harnack's understanding of monasticism and the search for possible connections.

Adolf von Harnack on Monasticism

In the second part, we will focus our attention on the renowned church historian and famous nester of the University of Berlin, where Bonhoeffer enrolled as a student of theology in 1924 and continued until 1927 when he completed his studies with the doctoral thesis *Sanctorum Communio*.⁸ We would like to propose that Adolf Harnack's reflections could have played their part in shaping Bonhoeffer's understanding of monasticism and its historical development. Bonhoeffer attended Harnack's university lectures, and alongside Luther's interpreter Karl Holl, church historian Hans Lietzmann, and systematic theologian Reinhold Seeberg, Harnack was one of Bonhoeffer's teachers who significantly shaped his theological direction (cf. Nelson 1999:28). The Harnack's ideas on monasticism can be found in already-mentioned books *What is Christianity* and *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History*.

7 Eberhard Bethge described the Sermon on the Mount to be the "nerve centre" of the seminary (cf. Musser & Price 1996:90).

8 For a closer insight into the Berlin period of Bonhoeffer's studies, see e.g. Bethge (1967) and Bethge (1961:4–5).

As in his other works (characterized by symbolizing the liberal Protestantism that dominated in the late 19th century), Harnack emphasizes the study of Christianity as a historical movement or a form of a religious consciousness. He is convinced that only a historical study of the texts of Scripture and the early church can clarify the true message of Jesus, freed from all subsequent dogmatic deposits. According to Harnack, this corruption or distortion of Christianity, primarily in the form of Greek metaphysics, whose categories the Christian faith adopted and thus distanced the church from its ties with the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. e.g. McGrath 2013:27).

Harnack wrote *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History* in 1880. Guided by a desire for a true appreciation and understanding of monasticism, he undertakes brief historical research in this short set of lectures. He notes that all Christian denominations, though different in many aspects, are united in their insistence that faith must manifest itself in a Christ-like life. The genuinely Christian life is the common ideal of all Christians. However, the paths begin to differ when we ask, what exactly is the nature of that life. The diversity of faith and the schism in the church is thus given not only by the difference of faith but above all by the difference of its ideals of life. These have divided the church permanently, not theological disputes, priestly lust of power, nor national diversities. Harnack states: “If we ask either the Roman or the Greek church wherein the most perfect Christian life consists, both alike reply: in the service of God, to the abnegation of all the good things of this life – property, marriage, personal will, and honour; in a word, in the religious renunciation of the world, that is, in Monasticism” (Harnack 1901:9–10). In this perspective, the true monk is the most perfect Christian. Therefore Harnack asks whether true monasticism is that which claims that the world with its nature and its history belong to the devil, or, conversely, that which sees God’s temple in the world and perceives the breath of the divine spirit in silent nature (cf. Harnack 1901:13). Harnack shows how the originally alienated and, at the same time, open moods of early Christianity gradually changed until the church got rid of the ideal of life that could be realized in it. The more it betrayed its original mission, the more its ideal allegedly became superhuman. The church taught that contemplation was the most exalted goal of the gospel, but it could not be achieved except by escaping the world (cf. Harnack 1901:45–46). However, Harnack rejects the idea of a Christian forced to pursue his life and ideals

outside this world, and instead appreciates, for example, the later Cluny reform, which understood Christian freedom not only as person's freedom from the world but as the freedom to serve God in the world (cf. Harnack 1901:62, 83).

The conclusion of the whole book is particularly interesting. Based on the question of what relationship monasticism should have towards the church and the world, Harnack shows the different attitudes and paths of Western and Eastern monasticism:

Monasticism in the East maintained its independence at the cost of stagnation; monasticism in the West remained effectual at the cost of losing its essential principle. In the East it was shattered, because it thought it could despise moral effort for the benefit of the world; and in the West it succumbed, because it subjected itself to a Church that devoted religion and morality to the service of politics. But there, as here, it was the Church herself that engendered monasticism and appointed its ideals; and thus in East and West alike, though after long vacillation and severe struggles, monasticism came finally to be the protector of ecclesiastical tradition and the guardian of ecclesiastical empiricism; and so its original aims were transformed into their opposites (Harnack 1901:114–115).

Thus, Harnack does not deny the fact that even today monasticism can bring peace to people tired of the world. He notes, however, that the historical view he has outlined goes (and should go) further – to the Luther's message about the person who begins to resemble Christ by contributing to the work of God's kingdom in their vocation and sphere of life through faith and service of love. In Harnack's understanding, even this ideal is not a perfect expression of the content of the Gospel message, but it shows the path that the Christian should follow to protect oneself from hypocrisy and self-deception (cf. Harnack 1901:115–116).

Some of the ideas outlined above are also found in the fifth of the sixteen lectures Harnack gave in 1889/1890, first published in *What is Christianity* in 1900. The relationship between the Gospel and the world (which is, according to Harnack, the first of the six basic relationships induced by Jesus' message) he defines as a question of asceticism. Harnack here likewise reminds that monastic life is considered the most authentic way

of spiritual life in all the great churches, from Eastern Orthodoxy to Western Catholicism. However, associating Christianity with the negation of the world and escaping from it are phenomena that he criticizes as non-biblical (cf. Vogel 2012:91). Harnack understands true Christian asceticism reflected in Jesus' life, especially in his "struggle against mammon, worry, and selfishness, which are the true embodiment of the devil, against whom the only weapon is evangelical self-denial and sacrifice in the love of neighbour" (Vogel 2012:92).

Bonhoeffer and Harnack

In the first part, this essay aimed to briefly look into the thoughts of Bonhoeffer's theology associated with Finkenwalde and now we want to evaluate the possible significance of Harnack's reflections presented above for Bonhoeffer's later call for new monasticism. Unlike examining the direct or only indicated influence of other thinkers on Bonhoeffer, where it remains debatable until the last moment whether or not they had a part in some of Bonhoeffer's ideas, it can be said a lot about Bonhoeffer's relationship with his teacher Adolf Harnack on a personal and also partly theological level.⁹ Harnack definitely belonged to Bonhoeffer's influential Berlin teachers, and according to one of Harnack's interpreters, Bonhoeffer was his most original student (cf. Rumscheidt 1999:53). However, if we are looking for specific common themes in which this influence manifested itself the most, we rely on only a few works. Moreover, none of them seem to address the question of monasticism in more depth.¹⁰ Therefore, we will shortly try to present some of own conclusions.

First, if we focus here on Harnack's understanding of monasticism, one may be surprised. Monasticism, seen through Harnack's lens, should not be a form of escape from the world and its negation, but as he says, in the "evangelical sense" – a fight against mammon, worry, and selfishness, and above all a serving and sacrificing love (cf. Harnack 1977:60). Bonhoeffer, when interpreting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, pays ample attention to the question of mammon and draws attention to the obstacle between the

9 For closer historical context see e.g. Schlingensiepen (2010).

10 Cf. e.g. Kaltenborn (1973); Pangritz (1999); Rumscheidt (2008); Pless (2017).

person and God that is accumulated wealth. He talks about the problem of selfishness and worries by describing the need for “the simplicity of a carefree life” (cf. Bonhoeffer 1962:105–116). At the end of the book *What is Christianity*, we find an important paragraph: “The Reformation abolished monasticism and was bound to abolish it. It rightly affirmed that to take a vow of lifelong asceticism was a piece of presumption, and it rightly considered that any worldly vocation conscientiously followed, in the sight of God was equal to, nay, was better than, being a monk. But something now happened which Luther neither foresaw nor desired: *monasticism*, of the kind that is conceivable and necessary *in the evangelical sense of the word*, disappeared altogether” (Harnack 1977:308).

If Harnack highlights the disappearance of monasticism *in the evangelical sense*, Bonhoeffer’s later call for *new monasticism* can be understood as an attempt to rediscover its meaning. Indeed, Harnack emphasizes in the quoted text and its continuation that this is a necessity and that no church can live without inducing that need in humans. In a certain sense, it can be stated that Harnack has been calling for a new type of monasticism for several years before Bonhoeffer. Harnack placed the word “monasticism” in quotation marks here, probably to distinguish it from its pre-Reformation understanding, which of course defines itself against the failures of Eastern and Western monastics described in his second book on this subject. Bonhoeffer seemed to respond to this “challenge” and later implements it in his church as he led the Finkenwalde seminary. It turns out that the various allegations of Catholicization of Lutheran spirituality are a real misunderstanding in this optic. In fact, Bonhoeffer in Finkenwalde was trying to render Luther’s words about the disappearance of monasticism as not true. It was Harnack who said that the disappearance of monasticism is something that Luther neither foresaw nor desired.

Bonhoeffer, like Harnack in both of his mentioned books, highlights Luther’s significance and his experience as a monk, illustrating the necessity of the real Christian discipleship. When Bonhoeffer speaks of the need for “new” monasticism, we believe that Harnack, freely speaking, could have presented through his historical research the essence of the “old one” to Bonhoeffer. According to Harnack, it was characterized by its negation to the world, its escape from it, and, among other things, its inaccessibility for ordinary people. Both of these characteristics are also

found in Bonhoeffer's writings. Harnack likewise speaks of monasticism as an extraordinary performance of individuals, which most people have not achieved over time. He emphasizes that Christians should not belong to monastic seclusion, but that their ministry is to go to the very midst of the world.

The uniqueness of Bonhoeffer's approach lies above all in his emphasis on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Such a reinterpreted monasticism is according to Bonhoeffer no longer one of the possible options and intended only for a small group of people but becomes a requirement for all who have taken the message of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount seriously. Thus, based on Bonhoeffer's understanding, every Christian should become a monk "in the midst of the world". Clifford Green is convinced based on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, where it is evident, that all oppositional perceptions of Christian theology, such as "worldly-Christian, natural-supernatural, profane-sacred, good and evil (etc.) are annulled by the reconciliation wrought by the God who became a human and the person of Jesus Christ, and for whom the church was the present Christ in the social-natural-historical reality of the world" (DeJonge 2018:xv-xvi). We believe that despite the apparent development of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the world/worldliness, the "annulment" of all these dualisms may have its roots in Finkenwalde and may grow from the Finkenwalde experience, even though the German context at the time apparently did not allow it to be more explicit.

Conclusion

The purpose of the presented article was not to prove Bonhoeffer's inspiration by Harnack's reflections, but rather to present how the common themes of the two authors concerning the question of monasticism may contribute to a deeper understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology of the Finkenwalde period. Obviously, in many aspects, Bonhoeffer eventually went in a totally different direction than that of liberal theology and cultural Protestantism, of which Adolf Harnack was an icon at that time. However, their thinking about a new type of monasticism in some ways definitely intersects. As Keith Clements points out, the decisive theological influence on Bonhoeffer during his studies in Berlin came outside of Berlin and was linked to a revolution caused by dialectical theology, the main protagonist of which

was a Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (Clements 2010:4). The fact that even during the Finkenwalde period (in the winter of 1935/1936) Bonhoeffer visited the University of Berlin once a week to give a lecture on *Discipleship*, which, in his own words, was not open to similar topics at the time, shows how strongly he was convinced that following Christ in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount is a fundamental, perhaps the most essential theological question (cf. Frick 2017:59).

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