

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and William J. Seymour

A Comparison between two ecumenists

BY WALTER J. HOLLENWEGER

The Pentecostal movement started as an ecumenical renewal movement which was intended to bridge racial, national, social and denominational divides. The ecumenical movement subscribes to the same ideas and goals. What has been overlooked so far is that both movements owe their insights in part to the spirituality and the experience of the black slaves in the United States. Pentecostalism owes its early participation in black spirituality to scores of black hymn-writers and evangelists (in the United States¹ and in South Africa),² the ecumenical movement to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's early contacts with black Christians.

The following essay therefore establishes this historical similarity and then proceeds to some theological and ecumenical insights which follow from these historical roots.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The most decisive insight for Bonhoeffer was his discovery that the church transcends the boundaries of class, race and nation. Bonhoeffer came to this insight through his negative experience in a nationalist German church (which in his view is a contradiction in terms) and through the positive experience of his ecumenical contacts, amongst them his discovery of the black churches in New York which showed a striking resemblance to William J. Seymour's early Pentecostal church in Los Angeles. Bonhoeffer was one of the first – and for at least forty years the only Western – theologian who saw the political and theological relevance of the spirituality of these black churches. The following midrash is based on Bonhoeffer's notes and my knowledge of those kinds of churches.³ The whole sequence is – what I would call – a true story, although invented.

When Bonhoeffer arrived at the Church of God in Christ in Harlem, the service had already begun. A young negro sang:

When the Holy Ghost fills you
you can smile

When the blood of Jesus cleanses you
you can smile

When you feel like the baptist.

Here he interrupted his singing and commented: «You know, brothers and sisters, John the Baptist, the one who had to eat locusts and wild honey. When you feel like the baptist . . .» and the whole congregation joined him:

You can smile.

When your heart is full of sadness
you can smile.

The choir, clothed in long and bright gowns, took up the theme. «You can smile.» The two drummers took up the rhythm, first very softly: You can, you can, yes, you can smile. The soloist sang the next stanza:

When they stare at you because you are black
you can smile.

«Halleluja, you can smile.» The choir began to move and danced with short, rhythmical steps up the aisle into the church nave.

Half the congregation stood up and sang. Yes. Lord, you can smile.

When the Klu Klux Klan threatens you with fire
You can smile.

When the Black Power people call you a coward
You can smile.

A black man who had so far watched the service in silence, stood up. It must be the pastor. Bonhoeffer saw that he – in contrast to the choir – did not wear either a cassock or a gown. «Brothers and sisters», he said, «we have a guest amongst us. A Lutheran pastor from Germany.» Bonhoeffer looked around. Did he mean him? «We ask our Lutheran guest to come forward and to join us on the platform.» «What shall I do?» thought Bonhoeffer. But he went forward and the black Christians broke out in long and cheerful applause.

«You know», the pastor continued, «some weeks ago I was invited by the Council of Churches of New York to a meeting. The catholics had also sent a priest and there were some secretaries from the Federation of Christian Churches. And many other denominations were there. We asked the Chairman of the New York Council

of churches: Why did you never invite us to your meetings? And the chairman said: We are very sorry, we did not know that you existed.» The whole congregation laughed. «Dr Bonhoeffer, welcome to our service. You surely know that we exist. What do you have to tell us?» The congregation shouted, «Praise the Lord», and applauded again.

Bonhoeffer was taken by surprise. What should he say? Fortunately these black people were thoughtful. First they sang another hymn. It was one of those famous spirituals about the final liberation of all people. Superficially it was a hymn about heaven. «I'm going to lay down my heavy load.» Bonhoeffer listened carefully. «What, brothers and sisters, shall we lay down?» the pastor asked. And in full harmony the congregation replied: «I'm going to lay down my heavy load.»

A well-endowed elderly negro woman sang the next stanza. She did not only sing with her mouth, which she could open unbelievably wide. Everything about her sang. The well-upholstered hips, the thick legs, the strong arms, even the big, swaying breasts sang the rhythm of the hymn: «I know my robe's going to fit me well. I've tried it on at the gates of hell.» and again the whole congregation joined in: «I'm going to lay down my heavy load.»

Bonhoeffer thought: How true. We stand at the gates of hell. But the assurance of a coming morning gives us strength. Unbidden a prayer rose in him: «Thy kingdom come». But he also thought of his teachers in Germany and of his colleagues who tried in clever formulations to justify the German policy of aggression. And he thought of those Lutheran theologians who tried to keep out of the battle by making correct, yet irrelevant, definitions of the Holy Spirit. It was almost laughable. These Christians here did not need any speeches on the Holy Spirit. They experienced him. He talked to them. But what should he tell them? He did not think that he had anything to say, at least not for the moment.

When the hymn was finished the pastor asked him to come to the pulpit. Bonhoeffer stood up. «Brothers and sister» – Bonhoeffer was just beginning to understand the meaning of this way of addressing the church – «brothers and sisters, I want to thank you for your invitation. I hear your songs and your prayers. I cannot sing them and I do not know your prayers.» (In fact, he thought, that was not quite true. But he could not tell them for the moment what was troubling him about the gates of hell in Germany, about the negroes

of Germany who were not only oppressed but killed.) «But I thank you for your spirituals. That is all.»

He sat down. The congregation was a little astonished. The pastor understood the situation right away. «Brothers and sisters, Dr Bonhoeffer is a German theologian. And, you know, such theologians usually speak with a paper in front of them on which is written their speech. You must understand. That's what they learn at the university.» Everybody laughed. «Give him a hand», he said finally, and all clapped their hands.

«Yes, brothers and sisters», the pastor continued, «we shall wonder, wonder and marvel, when we once shall overcome, when all the saints are marching into the city of golden streets . . .» He had hardly finished when the trombone began to play: «Oh, when the saints, oh when the saints, oh when the saints are marching in.» And again they stood up and danced and marched through the church.

«Brothers and sisters», an old grey-haired negro continued the theme, «when the saints march into the new Jerusalem, do you think there will be Catholic saints. Lutheran saints, Pentecostal saints?» «No, no», the church shouted. «Will there be black saints and white saints?» And again the whole congregation shouted, «No, no.» «No», the preacher said in a hoarse voice, which cut right through the whole building. «No, there will only be saints. Saints who have washed their garments. halleluja. But some of us will marvel, I tell you. In heaven we will marvel even more than down here. You know, in heaven it will become clear, very clear indeed, what we worship. Whether we worship Jesus, the manual worker, Jesus, our saviour, or whether we worship our own fears and our own impulses. Yes, brothers and sisters, it will become clear whether we worship our own race, our nation, our money – even if we do not have much of it, praise God – or whether we worship Jesus. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if, on the Last Judgement Day, all white people would be confronted with a black Jesus . . .» The preacher stopped. There was dead silence in the church. Everybody looked at Bonhoeffer. The preacher continued, «Yes, brothers and sisters, I wouldn't be surprised in the least if all white people would be confronted with a black Jesus, and all black people with a white Jesus. Let us pray.»

Bonhoeffer folded his hands. But these black Christians had obviously a different understanding of prayer from his, for they began to sing again. Bonhoeffer did not know whether they invented the

song or whether it was a song known to them. Anyhow they did not use a hymnal. They asked for God's blessing for their work, for their church. They made a special stanza in which they prayed for their German guest and his students and then for a whole verse they sang «Amen». Bonhoeffer did not know whether white Christians would perhaps meet a black Christ on the Last Day of Judgement. Possibly. But surely Aryan Christians would meet a Jewish Christ.

This midrash is one way of describing how Bonhoeffer reached the certainty that the church is a community of brothers which stands against all human divisions be they drawn up by Americans, Germans or Africans.⁴ This is documented in the new catechism which he wrote after his return from his first visit to the United States. It looked so old-fashioned to the English translators that they did not bother to include it in their collection of Bonhoeffer's works. But on closer examination one finds that this catechism takes a decisive step towards a new and politically explosive ecclesiology. There is for instance the question: What is the church's position on family and nation? Answer: The church recognises them as God's gift but she also knows that *the Holy Spirit* is a stronger bond than the bonds of blood and of a common national history. In the church there is neither master nor slave, neither man or woman, *neither Jew nor German*. They are all one in Christ (1 Tim. 4:4; Gal. 3:28). The political implications of this catechism (!) went further than most newspaper articles. The words explicitly contradicted the then German law, and, in the situation of 1936, this could only be seen as subversive. Bonhoeffer went further and added a paragraph which had never been included in a Lutheran catechism before, namely the question: what is the church's position over against an unjust authority?⁵ Later in prison he came to the conclusion that in the twentieth century Luther would have had to say the contrary of what he had said in the sixteenth century in order to say the same thing about the church's position vis à vis the state.⁶

To sum up, it can be said that the belief in, and the «true myth» of, a universal and catholic church was the basis for Bonhoeffer's involment in the German church struggle and finally in subversive revolutionary actions.⁷

William J. Seymour (1870–1922)⁸

Seymour was a son of former slaves from Centerville, Louisiana. He taught himself to read and write and was for a time a student in Charles Fox Parham's Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Parham (1873–1929), often described as a pioneer of Pentecostalism, was also a sympathizer of the Ku-Klux-Klan and he therefore excluded Seymour from his Bible classes. Seymour was allowed only to listen outside the classroom through the half-open door. Nevertheless, Seymour accepted Parham's doctrine of the baptism of the Spirit and began to teach it in a Holiness church in Los Angeles.

Seymour and his black brothers suffered bitterly. During Seymour's adult lifetime 3436 black persons were known to have been lynched, averaging two a week. Innumerable brutalities took place around him, many of them instigated by Christians. In spite of constant humiliation he developed a spirituality which led in 1906 to a revival in Los Angeles which most Pentecostal historians believe to be the cradle of Pentecostalism. The roots of Seymour's spirituality lay in his past. He affirmed his black heritage by introducing negro spirituals and negro music into his liturgy at a time when this music was considered inferior and unfit for Christian worship. At the same time he steadfastly lived out his understanding of Pentecost. For him Pentecost meant more than speaking in tongues. It meant to love in the face of hate, to overcome the hatred of a whole nation by demonstrating that Pentecost is something very different from the success-oriented American way of life.

In the revival in Los Angeles white bishops and black workers, men and women, Asians and Mexicans, white professors and black laundry women were equals (1906!). No wonder that the religious and secular press reported the extraordinary events in detail. As they could not understand the revolutionary nature of this Pentecostal spirituality they took refuge in ridicule and scoffed: 'What good can come from a self-appointed negro prophet?'

The mainline churches too criticized the emerging Pentecostal movement. They despised the Pentecostals because of their lowly black origins. Social pressure soon prompted the emerging Pentecostal church bureaucracy to tame the Los Angeles revival. Pentecostal churches segregated into black and white organizations just as most of the other churches had done. This did not hinder the Pentecostal denominations from developing on a worldwide scale. They are strongest, however, in certain countries of the Third World such

as Brazil,⁹ Colombia,¹⁰ Chile,¹¹ Central America and the Caribbean,¹² Mexico,¹³ Indonesia, India,¹⁴ Korea¹⁵ and the Soviet Union,¹⁶ and many countries in Africa.

The reason for this growth does not lie in a particular Pentecostal doctrine. Doctrinally Pentecostalism is not a consistent whole. There are trinitarian and non-trinitarian, infant and adult baptizing Pentecostals and many other versions. There is no worldwide Pentecostal organization. The reason for its growth lies in its black roots, which can be summarized like this:

- 1 orality of liturgy
- 2 narrativity of the theology and witness
- 3 maximum participation at the levels of reflection, prayer and decision-making and therefore a form of community which is reconciliatory
- 4 inclusion of dreams and visions into personal and public forms of worship; they function as kinds of icons for the individual and the community
- 5 an understanding of the body/mind relationship which is informed by experiences of correspondence between body and mind; the most striking application of this insight is the ministry of healing by prayer.

In Europe and North America, Pentecostalism is fast developing into an Evangelical middle-class religion, many of the elements which were vital for its rise and expansion into the Third World are disappearing. They are being replaced by efficient fund-raising structures, a streamlined ecclesiastical bureaucracy and a Pentecostal conceptual theology. In Europe and North America this theology follows the Evangelical traditions to which is added the belief in the baptism of the Spirit, mostly but not always characterized by the 'initial sign' of speaking in tongues.

A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

Bonhoeffer, a white German, and Seymour, a black American ecumenist, came to the insight that the Church of Jesus Christ is catholic, ecumenical and universal or it is not the Church of Jesus Christ. This insight is today more important than ever. Christianity has become a universal movement which is no longer predominantly white. The Pentecostals and Charismatics and above all the Non White Indigenous Churches (which in many cases have their roots

in early Pentecostalism) have played an important part in this development. The total membership of all three streams of Pentecostalism was over one hundred million in 1980 and is expected to grow to 250 million in the year 2000.¹⁷ This means that in the not too distant future there will be more Christians belonging to this type of Christianity than to the Anglican community. They will number almost as many as all other Protestants together.

Although the Roman Catholic and the Protestant mission churches are undergoing drastic changes, as long as the western mission agencies can subsidize them they will at least maintain a facade of denominationalism of the western type. But money and personnel from the west cannot guarantee the unchallenged continuation of our theological and ecclesiastical categories in the Third World. The question which any concerned missiologist must ask himself is this: What will replace this?

I cannot answer this question but I know what *should* replace it. Our Mediterranean theological approach must be replaced by a new universal theological approach. Either we Christians are successful in finding a new unity which is not based (or at least not entirely based) on the traditions of the west and its organizational models, or we will face a split in Christianity which will have more painful consequences than the split between Catholics and Protestants. It will be a split which strengthens the already existing political and economic antagonism between the north and the south. Such a development would contradict the very essence of twentieth century ecumenism. It can only be avoided if we resolutely develop tools for the forging of an intercultural theology which bridges the gap between the majority and the minority of Christians, namely between oral and literary Christians. This also helps us in our western countries to communicate again with our own (oral) membership on a *theological* and not just on a ritual and religious level. If Karl Barth is right in defining theology as a function of the Church¹⁸ and the Church is composed of black and white, oral and literary men and women, then we have to find a theology which will not be conceptually uniform but will nevertheless provide the basis for a mutual process of learning and recognition.

The model for such a theological process is Scripture. Scripture bridges the gap between cultures by making use of parabolical, dramatic and narrative patterns as has been demonstrated admirably

by form criticism. Such a theology does not rule out the use of Mediterranean European categories but their use is not governed entirely by faithfulness to our cultural heritage but equally by commitment to the universality of the Church.

How are the disciples of Bonhoeffer and Seymour faring in this task? I am afraid they are not doing very well. Bonhoeffer's disciples by and large define and discuss the universality of the Church in concepts which are not (or no longer) universal. They therefore contradict what they say with how they say it. Seymour's disciples either ignore the ecumenical debate altogether or try to imitate the thought categories of conceptual theology.

There are, however, promising exceptions. For some years the World Council of Churches has been experimenting with intercultural theology.¹⁹ It is not by accident that the liturgies and prayers at the Full Assembly in Vancouver made a greater impact on the participants than the policy statements.

For their part Pentecostals, Charismatics and Non-White Indigenous Churches have produced new church music, oral liturgies and modes of presenting their belief which are both scriptural and rooted in their respective oral folk culture.

What has not happened so far is the critical and theological reflection on this spirituality of the future. In fact one gets the impression that scholarship is not interested in spirituality. But that is a dangerous departure from Christian tradition. In the New Testament, in Thomas from Aquina, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and many others, spirituality was never divorced from theology or vice versa.

This reflection is necessary for keeping theological research *and* the many oral spiritualities on target towards a universal Christian witness. There is no reason why black and white, Seymour and Bonhoeffer, should not meet in prayer *and* in theology.

NOTER

- 1) The historical roots of Pentecostalism in the black-led Los Angeles revival have been admirably demonstrated by Nils Bloch-Hoell. In this essay in honour of a great historian I intend to proceed from this *historical* judgement to its *theological* implications.
- 2) On the role of black evangelists in the early South African Pentecostal movement, see Bengt Sundkler, *Zulu Zion* (Uppsala 1976) and, with fresh documentation and in more detail, Martin Robinson in his Birmingham dissertation on David Du Plessis (in progress).

- 3) Bonhoeffer, «Berich über den Studienaufenthalt im Union Theological Seminary zu New York 1930/31», *Gesammelte Schriften* I (Munich 1958), 84–103. On the black churches see p. 97. See also Ulrich Duchrow, «Kann Bonhoeffers gelebte Lehre von der Kirche in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland rezipiert werden», in: Christofer Frey/Wolfgang Huber (eds), *Schöpferische Nachfolge. Festschrift für Heinz Eduard Tödt* (FEST, Heidelberg 1978), 394.
- 4) Bonhoeffer, «Ansprache, Herbst 1930 in New York», *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 67f. ET: in *No Rusty Sword* (London 1970), 73f.
- 5) *Gesammelte Schriften* III, 362 f, italics mine.
- 6) Bonhoeffer, Letter to his parents, 31.10.1943, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Munich 1970), 141; ET: *Letters and Papers* (London 1971), 123.
- 7) For a fuller discussion on Bonhoeffer see W. J. Hollenweger, *Umgang mit Mythen. Interkulturelle Theologie II* (Munich 1982), 15–29.
- 8) Since we now possess a reliable Pentecostal bibliography (Charles Edwin Jones, *A Guide to the Study of the Pentecostal Movement*, 2 vols, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. and The American Theological Library Association, Metuchen, N. J., & London, 1983), I shall hereafter only mention books which are not in this bibliography.
 For a full treatment of Seymour see Nelson and Tinney (Jones 9060/61). See also Iain MacRobert, «African and European Roots of Black and White Pentecostalism in Britain» in W. J. Hollenweger (ed), *Pentecostal Research in Europe: Problems, Promises, and People* (to be published in Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity, Frankfurt/Bern, Lang) and Roswith Gerloff «The Development of Black Churches in Britain since 1952» in the same volume.
- 9) Jones 2460–2483.
- 10) Karl-Wilhelm Westmeier, The Pentecostal Community of Bogota, Colombia, Unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Aberdeen. Jones 2508–2514a.
- 11) Jones 2484–2507.
- 12) Jones 2403–2418a.
- 13) Jones 2225–2234a. See also research in progress by Manuel Gaxiola-Gaxiola and Kenneth D. Gill.
- 14) Jones 2526–2533.
 Solomon Raj, «A Christian Folk-Religion in India» (to be published in Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity). Werner Hoerschelmann, «Christliche Gurus. Darstellung von Selbstverständnis und Funktion indigene Christseins durch unabhängige, charismatisch geführte Gruppen in Südindien» (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 12, Frankfurt/Berlin, Lang, 1977).
- 15) Jones 2533–34.
 See also research in progress by Boo Woong Yoo.
- 16) Jones 2605–2630.
- 17) David S. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (London 1982).
- 18) *Church Dogmatics* 1/1, p. 1.
- 19) Arnold Bittlinger (ed), *The Church is Charismatic. The World Council of Churches and the Charismatic Renewal*, Geneva 1981. Particularly important in this volume is the report by the General Secretary Philip Potter (73ff).