Bonhoeffer’s Anti-Logos and its Challenge to Oppression*

A. Introduction

Throughout human history, religion has been one of the greatest contributors to oppression in the world. L.K. Sharma wrote that “religion is often a smokescreen for political oppression.” Marx branded religion as opium for the people, due to its tendency to lead people to be content with poverty and repression by rationalizing current circumstances. Lenin, following Marx, wrote that “religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.” These authors highlight the tendency of religion to perpetuate oppression by creating a rationale for it, usually for the benefit of the rich and powerful and to the detriment of the poor and marginalized. Moreover, religion can also play an active and aggressive role. Eyler Robert Coates argues that “all but a very few religious systems consider those who differ from them to be infidels or heretics, and feel that any effort to destroy those other differing beliefs is the work of God.”

Despite Jesus’ instructions to “turn the other cheek” (Mt 5:39) and His declaration that “blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9), Christianity has also had its share in contributing to oppression and bloodshed. The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisitions, and the State Church under Nazi rule in Germany during World War II are just a few chilling examples of this. On a less extreme level, there is a growing disparity between the rich and the poor in Western Christianized nations. We must ask, therefore, why does religion tend to justify oppression? One reason is that, generally speaking, a religion is simply an extension of a particular culture’s norms, values, and expectations regarding the meaning of life. As such, religion is basically a human creation which safeguards the self-oriented goals of particular human cultures. Is the

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Christian gospel any different? Can it actually challenge worldviews and confront self-motivated beliefs and desires (whether conscious or unconscious)? As an Evangelical Christian, I would like to say that, indeed, it is different—the gospel can and does confront us. However, I must acknowledge the extreme difficulties associated with attempting to separate gospel from culture (especially my own Western culture). Lesslie Newbigin states the problem this way:

How can it challenge us? We may use one of Isaiah’s parables (in a sense opposite to his) as ask: “Shall the axe vaunt itself against him who hews with it?” (Isa 10:15). The Bible and the church are part of our culture. How shall a part of our culture make claims against our culture? Is there any meaning in speaking of an encounter?

In this article I will investigate this question of whether or not Christianity (i.e. Christ) can challenge or confront its surrounding culture, especially in cases where there is systemic oppression active within the culture. I will propose that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of Christ as the Anti-Logos can help Christians to stand against oppression by directing them to discern the person and voice of the living Christ. To establish this, I will pursue three lines of argumentation: first, the Anti-Logos challenges all totalizing tendencies and claims; second, the Anti-Logos identifies with the oppressed and the victimized; and third, the Anti-Logos radically redefines the identity of one’s neighbour. However, before I proceed, I will elucidate the meaning of Anti-Logos as Bonhoeffer presents it in his Christology lecture series.

B. Bonhoeffer’s Anti-Logos

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all teaching about Christ begins in silence. The fact that Jesus Christ is the Incarnate Son of God is the ultimate presupposition for all faith, theology, and indeed all reality. Thus, Christology is the discipline par excellence; it stands alone. As such, it is not possible for us to discover this truth by way of reasoning, nor is there any way we can prove it to others. When left to our own logos, which is our own reasoning, we cannot engage in true theology; we can only engage in mythology because our thoughts and language are
inadequate and distorted. We attempt to classify Christ according to our own categories of understanding but, due to our fallenness, we cannot think outside of ourselves. So, we assimilate him into our own desires and agendas. We mistakenly associate him with our own values and ideals, thereby claiming divine approval for our own logoi.

Therefore, Bonhoeffer argues, Jesus Christ came as the supreme Anti-Logos, declaring all human logoi to be judged and dead. While he walked the earth, he refused to be classified by the human logos, whether this meant being integrated into an oppressive religious/political order (i.e. Pharisaic religion), or yielding to militant messianic expectations regarding the emancipation of the Jewish people from Roman rule (i.e. the Zealots), or any other attempts to assimilate him. Consequently, humanity could neither understand nor accept him. Since the divine Anti-Logos claims supremacy over all human claims, the human logos cannot coexist with the Anti-Logos. The human logos is confined to itself and cannot think outside of itself. It is obsessed with what Bonhoeffer calls “how?” questions, which are questions of immanence—those which are subject to human classification (i.e. how does Jesus fit into our worldview?). The human logos cannot ask that question which alone is significant: namely “Who is Christ?” The question “Who?” is a recognition of transcendence and, as such, it cannot be posed. For indeed, how can one recognize or even seek that which is truly and totally other? In the first chapter of his gospel, the apostle John captures this idea of the Incarnate (Anti-) Logos, who is transcendent yet immanent, divine yet human, and unrecognizable yet familiar: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive him” (Jn 1:10-11).

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, the encounter of the divine Anti-Logos with the human logos is always a confrontation: “The logos cannot endure the Anti-Logos. It knows that one of them
must die.” Such confrontation took place throughout Jesus’ life and was epitomized at His
death, in which the human logos crucified Christ in a desperate and selfish attempt to preserve
itself. However, God raised Jesus from the dead and thus affirmed him as the ultimate and
triumphant Word of God, the divine Anti-Logos who supercedes and overrules all human logoi.
Hence, Paul’s declaration to the Philippians: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest
place…and that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow…” (Php 2:9ff).

So, according to Bonhoeffer, we must never use Christ as a means to an end in order to
support our own agendas. Unfortunately, however, there have been countless attempts to do this,
as when religious or political ideas are approved a priori and then, subsequently, attached to the
historical Jesus. In such cases, Christ is regarded as the embodiment of particular sets of ideals.
Bonhoeffer points out that this was the mistake of Liberal theology:

It understands Jesus as the support for or the embodiment of particular ideas, values and doctrines. As a result, the manhood of Jesus Christ is in the last resort not taken seriously, although it is this very theology which speaks so often of the man…it confuses the real man with an ideal man and makes him a symbol.

Bonhoeffer goes on to show that to manipulate the gospel of Christ in such a manner is to
relapse into the ancient Docetic heresy, which downplayed Christ’s humanity by emphasizing an antithesis between idea and appearance and by depicting Christ as the manifestation of God’s idea (thus, there is no real mediator between God and humanity!). Practically speaking, the danger in this is that we lose all critical controls for speaking about God: what we worship as ‘God’ is simply the projection of human ideals. The gospel can then be interpreted in such a way as to justify our own desires, regardless of whether or not they are selfish or oppressive to others. Whatever we value will be projected onto Christ, and whatever we regard as strange, different, or intolerable will be rejected as unchristian. There is no longer any room for the gospel to confront or convict us.
However, as the supreme Anti-Logos Jesus is the way, the truth, the life (Jn 14:6). He
defines the reality in which Christians live. Every human effort to categorize and classify the
truth definitively is necessarily incomplete, arbitrary, or even violent, because no one has a God-
eye view of the world and thus all such attempts distort the totality of the truth. As the risen
Lord, Jesus Christ continually refuses to be classified into self-motivated human agendas.
Therefore, Jesus the Anti-Logos is the critical control for all speech about God and the divine
judge over all human agendas. This has a number of implications for the Christian challenge to
oppression, three of which we will examine presently.

C. The Anti-Logos’ Challenge to Oppression

One way the concept of Anti-Logos challenges oppression is that it dismantles or
deconstructs all totalizing systems. By ‘totalizing’, I mean the systematic presentation of views,
texts, etc., which necessarily conveys certain ideas to further a particular cause, while at the same
time (consciously or unconsciously), represses others. For our purposes, we may think of
oppressive cultural or political ideas as being totalizing systems (In Bonhoeffer’s context, it was
the Nazi system and the nazification of Christianity in Germany). In this regard, Bonhoeffer’s
concept of the Anti-Logos plays a role similar the postmodern critique of system, as epitomized
by the notion of deconstruction (first associated with Jacques Derrida\textsuperscript{xiv}). One of the basic
features of deconstruction is to expose totalizing tendencies by demonstrating that the logic of a
particular text or idea undoes itself in the paradoxes and contradictions inherent within it.\textsuperscript{xv}
Every presentation (i.e. of an idea) contains within it various opposing views which have been
silenced. While the traditional mode of reading attends to that which is presented, deconstruction
attempts to extract what is absent or latent. In this manner, “deconstruction is nothing less than
an attempt to subvert the whole tradition of Western metaphysics (i.e. its metaphysics of
Similarly, Christianity, through Christ the Anti-Logos, “inverts the value systems of society” by proclaiming “the unending worth of the apparently worthless and the unending worthlessness of what is apparently so valuable. The weak shall be made strong through God and the dying shall live…” In other words, in a manner similar to deconstruction Bonhoeffer’s Anti-Logos gives a voice to the voiceless by attending to repressed or minority views.

Bonhoeffer’s concept of the Anti-Logos helps us see that oppression is built into the depths of the human condition, being embodied in the very language we speak. This has at least two implications for our purposes. First, we are locked-into or trapped in our own systems of thought, which are shaped by our own culture and embedded in our own language. This makes it very difficult for two distinct cultures to understand one another; not only must different people groups learn the other’s language (and this can take a lifetime to master), but they must also understand the expressions and values embedded within that language and the extent to which that language has shaped the other culture’s view of reality. Second, our systems of thought or views of ‘truth’ can never be equated with absolute truth; we can never claim to have the final word on truth. In fact, our tendency is to distort the truth, to reduce and control it for our own personal gain. Due to our fallenness, we are immersed in our own logos (words!). We are unable to think through to the reality of God, our minds being hostile toward him (Col 1:12). Through our linguistic and cultural experiences, our logos, we can erect mythology but we cannot discern true theology. Thus, we are in dire need of the Anti-Logos who, by His own divine initiative, breaks through our human blindness and selfishness. He commandeers our words and gives them new meaning in light of His Word or Anti-Word. Only he can open our eyes to new truths and new ways of thinking, for he provides not merely the truth but also the way and the life (Jn 14:6). Or, in Kierkegaard’s language: He provides not only the truth but also the condition for
understanding the truth. This insight leads us to a place of humility and openness before God, as we acknowledge that our idea systems, while necessary, are provisional and incomplete.

A second way that Bonhoeffer’s *Anti-Logos* poses a challenge to oppression is that it helps us to identify with those who are oppressed and victimized. Geffrey Kelly writes that Bonhoeffer depicts Jesus as “the revelation of God’s power in weakness.” In a role-reversal which is characteristic of the *Anti-Logos*, Jesus, the Lion of Judah who is also the Lamb of God, committed himself to an ultimate act of identification with the oppressed and the suffering. He allowed himself to be subjected to mockery, betrayal, physical abuse, and ultimately death on a cross, all for the sake of reaching the lost, freeing the captives, and reconciling to God those who were hostile to him. He did not simply ignore the problem of humanity’s alienation, nor did he wave a magic wand to make it all go away. Rather, he entered into it: He lived in it, brought it with him to the cross and then left it in the grave when God raised him from the dead. If the church is to follow the example of Jesus then it cannot be content to wrestle, at an intellectual level, with the problems of oppression in the world—whether these are war, racial issues, poverty, or homelessness. Nor can it expect such problems to simply vanish with the spreading of the gospel. For Bonhoeffer, “the true follower of Jesus—the disciple—is one who leaves behind the ‘cheap grace’ of merely institutional Christianity and accepts the ‘costly grace’ of Jesus’ call to ‘come and die.’” In the words of Geffrey Kelly:

It was Bonhoeffer’s contention that the church’s claim to be herald of God’s love for the world was only a vain boast if its credibility was not grounded in solidarity with the oppressed and in its willingness even to endure the bloody cross of persecution for the sake of those it would deliver from evil.

True discipleship in Christ implies reaching out to the oppressed, engaging with them and entering into their suffering. Like the apostle Paul, we must aspire to share in the sufferings of Christ (Php 3:10-11). We are His ministers, His body here on earth—His work has become our
work (by His Spirit). This is a pertinent challenge to the Western worldview, in which a person’s problems are his or her own business. It is perhaps a reprimand that our personal boundaries are too rigid, our beliefs are incongruent with our actions, and that our hearts are separated from our minds.

Furthermore, if the church is going to engage with the victimized and oppressed, it will have to release any claim to status, privilege or position in society. Just as the Anti-Logos stood against the cultural tide of His time, so the church must do the same today. In the Western world it is easy for us to compartmentalize our lives, separating our religion from our everyday action. In Bonhoeffer’s words, we are accustomed to “thinking in two spheres.” On Sundays we gather together to perform our religious duties, but during the rest of the week we forget about the needs of others and pursue our own interests for personal gain. Over time the church becomes an entity unto itself, existing only to serve itself. This, however, is not what Christ intended. To exist for oneself, and to structure one’s life around oneself is the way of the human logos. Everything else is assimilated into the self and made to serve the self’s own personal goals, including the church (though the goals may seem more ‘spiritual’—self-realization, self-renewal, spiritual health, etc.). Conversely, the way of the Anti-Logos is to exist for others. Just as the Triune God exists as an other-oriented Being (i.e. the mutual indwelling and overflow of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit), so the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ the Son of God/Man, exists for the sake of others. Therefore the church, as Christ’s presence on earth (the theme of Bonhoeffer’s Sanctorum Communio), must have its existence in loving outreach to others. This, of course, was God’s original intention for Israel in His covenant promise to Abraham: “I will surely bless you…and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed….” (Gen 22:17ff).
Therefore, according to Bonhoeffer, our lives must be characterized by prayer and righteous action. In prayer, we come in silence before the Word of God, the *Anti-Logos*, who addresses us through the Scriptures and molds us into His own image (especially when we gather in community and hear the gospel through proclamation). As we go out into the world we are the hands and feet of Christ (animated by his Spirit), and we continue to carry out His mission of existing for others. We enter the lives of others, sharing in their joys and in their sufferings. Thus, we share the presence of Christ with them. If we are to be successful in reaching the oppressed—the victimized, the impoverished, the ostracized—we must be willing to get our hands dirty, so to speak. Our communion will be with people who are very different from us, having different worldviews and ideas, different values (political, economic, ethical, etc.), and different comfort zones. Certainly, we will be challenged, for through them we will repeatedly encounter the *Anti-Logos*, Christ himself: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (See Matt 25:31-46).

A third way the concept of *Anti-Logos* challenges oppression and injustice is that it radically redefines our understanding of ‘neighbour’. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) Jesus overturns common misconceptions about the meaning of ‘neighbour’, especially the notion that ‘neighbour’ means a person familiar or similar to oneself, having common values and experiences. Conversely, Jesus emphatically illustrates that the concept of ‘neighbour’ must be broadened to include even those who are exceptionally different, including social outcasts, those with no status or voice in the community, and those of other races and cultures. According to Bonhoeffer, the Incarnation means that Christ became human, and in so doing he took our humanity into himself and restored to it the dignity of the image of God. Robert Willis comments that the significance of this is that “there is no neighbour in whom Christ is not
Potentially then, we could encounter Christ the *Anti-Logos* in everyone we meet, perhaps particularly in those who are different from us and challenge our usual way of thinking.

Lesslie Newbigin parallels this idea in his book *Foolishness to the Greeks*, as he struggles with the question of how it is possible for the gospel to confront and challenge Western Christians in fresh new ways. He explains that since our vision of Jesus is shaped by our culture, it is very difficult for us to evaluate our cultural values and presuppositions in light of the gospel. We are trapped in circularity: we read the gospel through the lens of our own presuppositions, such that our views are reinforced rather than challenged. Newbigin’s suggestion is that we experience Christ afresh when we encounter Christians in other parts of the world. We can come to see our own culture through the minds of Christians who have been shaped by other cultures:

> We need their witness to correct ours, as indeed they need ours to correct theirs. At this moment our need is greater, for they have been far more aware of the dangers of syncretism, of an illegitimate alliance with false elements in their culture, than we have been. But whether it is we or they, we imperatively need one another if we are to be the faithful witnesses of Christ in our many different cultures.

I propose that Bonhoeffer would agree with Newbigin. In his own experience Bonhoeffer empathized with the oppression and injustices of racism in America as he communed with Afro Americans at Union Seminary. This probably helped to sensitize him to the dangers of the Nazi position in Germany. However, Bonhoeffer would likely interpret these inter-cultural encounters in light of the Incarnation. He would argue that in meeting with Christians of other cultures—of different races, worldviews, values and assumptions—we encounter the divine *Anti-Logos*. Various aspects of Christ’s otherness or transcendence confront us in concrete ways when we engage in relationship with Christians who live in different societies. We are all part of Christ’s body, and yet we are all different. Therefore, we need each other in order to experience
the fullness of Christ (See Eph 3:14-19). As Newbigin remarks, “the word of God is to be spoken in every tongue, but it can never be domesticated in any.”

The Anti-Logos always addresses us in concreteness and transcendence, in familiarity and otherness.

Jesus’ teachings on the concept of ‘neighbour’ as other are most radical when he instructs us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us: (Matt 5:38-48). In commanding this, Jesus deconstructs our conventional understanding of love (our logoi) and undermines our attempts to dichotomize such relationships as friend–enemy, neighbour–foreigner, and victim–perpetrator. All of these relationships must now be seen in light of the Incarnation. This is absolutely necessary if we are ever going to overcome what Miroslav Volf calls the “predicament of partiality.”

Basically, the “predicament of partiality” is the tendency of opposing parties each to view their own actions as being just while viewing the other’s actions as being unjust, and each seeing themselves as victims and their opponents as perpetrators:

When one party sees itself as simply seeking justice or even settling for less than justice, the other may perceive the same action as taking revenge or perpetrating injustice. As the intended justice is translated by the other party into actual injustice, a “just” revenge leads to a “just” counter-revenge.

Thus, the spiral of vengeance escalates as victims become perpetrators, who in turn become victims, who in turn become perpetrators, continuing on ad infinitum. However, the Incarnation changes all of this. Since Christ has taken humanity into himself, sin perpetrated against humanity is in fact sin perpetrated against Christ—directly, not just indirectly.

Bonhoeffer explains that “any attack even on the least of men is an attack on Christ, who took the form of man, and in His own Person restored the image of God in all that bears a human form.” However, even though we were all enemies of God we have been reconciled with him through Christ. Just as God demonstrated His love for us in Christ and reconciled us to Himself, despite our hostility toward him, so we must now extend His love and grace to others, including
our enemies. Thus, it is through Christ that we are reconciled to God and to each other. What's more, Christ is not just our example in this but our Great High Priest who lives to intercede for us, accomplishing on our behalf what we are unable to do (Heb 6:20; 7:25-28; 8:1-6). As the divine Anti-Logos He is active in transforming our thoughts, attitudes, agendas, and perspectives, and forming them according to His own image.

D. Conclusion

We have seen that while religion often has the propensity to justify oppressive conditions (our logoi), Jesus Christ the Anti-Logos proclaims the end of all oppression. We discovered that in Bonhoeffer’s thought the Anti-Logos levels at least three challenges against oppression. First, as the way, the truth and the life, with whom we commune but cannot control or classify, the Anti-Logos disrupts all totalizing claims, systems and regimes. Second, as “the revelation of God’s power in weakness,” he empathetically identifies with all victims. And finally, as the one who encounters us in transcendent-concreteness, in human beings who are different from us, the Anti-Logos radically redefines our concept of ‘neighbour’. Jesus Christ is in the process of reconciling all things to Himself, not by means of violence and domination, but by making peace through his own blood, which he shed on the cross (Col 1:20).

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Endnotes:


vii Ibid., 28.

viii Ibid.

ix Ibid. NB. Bonhoeffer does not use the term ‘mythology’, but this captures the essence of what he is saying.

x Ibid., 30-32.

xi Ibid., 34.


xix I am indebted to Professor Alan Torrance for this notion of Christ commandeering our speech.


Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and Romero,” 98.


Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and Romero,” 95.


Quoted by Willis, “Bonhoeffer and Barth on Jewish Suffering,” 603.

Willis, “Bonhoeffer and Barth on Jewish Suffering,” 605.

Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 146.


Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and Romero,” 47.

Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 147.


Quoted by Willis, “Bonhoeffer and Barth on Jewish Suffering,” 603.
