

# OBJECTIVE SPIRIT AND CONTINUITY IN THE THEOLOGY OF DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to read Bonhoeffer's work as a whole. I maintain that Bonhoeffer's attempt to develop a distinctly Christian version of the Hegelian concept of objective spirit is the central concern of his *Sanctorum Communio*. I note the ways he continues to refine and clarify that concept in later works, even as it remains unnamed. I then argue that by the time of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, developing this concept has become Bonhoeffer's overriding project. I conclude by suggesting ways that the earlier works already provide resources for answering the probing questions of the *Letters and Papers*.

## I. The Question of Continuity in Bonhoeffer

Serious difficulties confront any interpreter of the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The first is the great diversity of genres represented: two deeply scholarly works, various lectures and seminars, devotional and spiritual works, sermons, and posthumous fragments. The second is the fact that his untimely death meant that his theological project remained essentially unfinished, in the sense of being unsystematized. This difficulty is in one sense Bonhoeffer's greatest strength: as Ernst Fiel says, "all [Bonhoeffer's] texts lead again and again to those last letters from prison which stimulated all the interest in Bonhoeffer and without which little notice would be paid today to the earliest writings" (Fiel 1985, 3). The compressed and fragmentary comments in the posthumous *Letters and Papers from Prison* have proven very productive for later theologians who have taken them as the starting point for more sustained reflection, in a way that they might not have

been had Bonhoeffer lived to attempt to answer to his own piercing questions.

Yet even if the importance of the *Letters and Papers from Prison* is unquestioned, the proper way to interpret them in light of Bonhoeffer's other work is not. Fiel lists several approaches to his work, with every possible starting point, and he remarks that the "possibility of making an unambiguous interpretation is quite slim if one cannot determine whether one is dealing with a work marked by qualitative leaps or by a continuous unfolding of its development" (Fiel 1985, 4). While not providing a conclusive answer to this question, he notes Bethge's caution against periodizing Bonhoeffer's work and then sets out to provide a reading of Bonhoeffer's whole theology in terms of his understanding of the world. In addition to this secondary testimony, there is the fact that while many thinkers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, and Karl Barth, come to understand their thought as having undergone a fundamental transformation, Bonhoeffer himself evinces no such self-understanding. Although he believes that Bethge "would be surprised, and perhaps even worried, by [his] theological thoughts and the conclusions that they lead to" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 279), only a week before those comments, he writes, "I don't think I've ever changed very much, except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad and under the first conscious influence of father's personality. It was then that I turned from phraseology to reality" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 275). He can "see the dangers" of *The Cost of Discipleship* (Bonhoeffer 1971, 369), but he stands behind it in a much less ambiguous way than, for example, Heidegger comes to stand behind *Being and Time*. Fundamentally, this is because "one can never go back behind what one has worked out for oneself" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 387)—even if corrections and later developments must be made, the fundamental insights of one's intense theological reflection cannot be discarded.

This paper will be a partial experiment in reading Bonhoeffer's theological work as a coherent whole. There are of course many works that find clues to the meaning of the *Letters and Papers* in his earlier work; for instance, John de Gruchy, in his introduction to the anthology *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Christ*, says that the basic theological viewpoint of *Sanctorum Communio* "provides a key building block for what follows, and is influential to the end" (de Gruchy 1991, 4).

I contend that we must go further than that: the concepts developed in such detail in *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being* continue to appear as such and undergo further development in his later works. A shift in style from the dissertations to the later more spiritual works does not indicate a shift in fundamental concerns or in conceptual framework. In order to test this contention, I will analyze the concept of objective spirit from *Sanctorum Communio*. With some reference to the works in between, I will then shift to the *Letters and Papers from Prison* to indicate the ways in which Bonhoeffer is still attempting to develop a distinctly Christian concept of objective spirit. Finally, I will conclude with some brief remarks on the ways in which we can understand *Sanctorum Communio* as already providing some of the resources necessary to answer the questions raised in *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

## II. Objective Spirit in *Sanctorum Communio*

The concept of objective spirit is well suited to this kind of inquiry for several reasons. First, it is a technical academic concept that would be equally out of place in a spiritual meditation such as *The Cost of Discipleship* or in a reflective letter written to a friend, so that the recurrence of the term itself in the later works should not be expected. Second, it is not in itself a theological term, but rather one of the ideas from that branch of phenomenological thought that Bonhoeffer calls “sociology.” Since the key to the uniqueness of his theological approach in *Communio Sanctorum* is his attempt to make sociological concepts “fruitful to theology” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 22), one can reasonably conclude that his distinctive theological conclusions can be found, not simply in the rather obvious assertion that he emphasizes the sociality of the church, but rather in the ways that he redeploys specific technical sociological terms. Objective spirit is one of the most important sociological terms in Bonhoeffer’s lexicon. Although it is easily confused with the concept of collective person, the concept of objective spirit actually appears more often in the final published version of the dissertation. In addition, it appears even more frequently in the parts of the dissertation that were edited out for the final publication, which most likely means that it was an especially formative idea as he was originally formulating his theological argument, even if he recognized

that his extensive reflections on the concept would not have appealed to a broader audience. Finally, unlike many of the sociological concepts deployed throughout the work, he explicitly refers to “the difference between the idealist and the Christian concept of objective spirit” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 145). Though he is always cautious to distance himself from idealism, he clearly sees “objective spirit” as a sociological concept that is potentially quite fruitful for theology.

In order to understand the way in which Bonhoeffer redeploys the concept of objective spirit, one must first understand its use in the work of Hegel. Bonhoeffer draws primarily on the third part of Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*, the “Philosophy of Spirit,”<sup>1</sup> in which Hegel devotes an entire section to the idea of objective spirit. For Hegel, “objective spirit is the absolute Idea, but only existing *in posse*.” The free subject approaches objective spirit as “an external and already subsisting objectivity,” which consists of both “external things of nature” insofar as they appear in the human world and “the ties of relation between individual wills which are conscious of their own diversity and particularity.” Since Hegel is thinking in the context of the Prussian state, for him objective spirit *par excellence* is the law, by which he means “not merely . . . the limited juristic law, but . . . the actual body of all the conditions of freedom” (Hegel 1971, 241–2). He includes under this heading not only the law, including property, contract, and the general concept of right and wrong, but also such institutions as the family, the state, and the administration of justice, and even the idea of universal history. All of these are the materials that present themselves to the free subject as self-evident and pre-existing, but which act to shape the subject’s concrete exercise of freedom. Both the material and conceptual aspects of objective spirit are equally self-consistent and equally beyond the control of the particular subject, and both are provided ultimately by “the plan of Providence . . . , in short, . . . Reason in history” (Hegel 1971, 277).

Bonhoeffer adopts the same basic structure for his Christian concept of objective spirit. In the discussion of objective spirit in his chapter on “The Primal State and the Problem of Community,” Bonhoeffer notes: “Mostly without realizing it, people mean two different things when they speak of objective spirit: (1) objectified spirit as opposed to unformed spirit, and (2) social spirit as opposed

to subjective spirit. Both meanings are based on the fact that where wills unite, a 'structure' is created—that is, a third entity, previously unknown, independent of being willed or not willed by the persons who are uniting." This concept is called a "discovery of the qualitative thinking that became dominant in romanticism and idealism"—not a speculative flight of fancy, but rather a genuine insight that provides the only means to grasp "[c]oncrete totality, which is not a matter of quantity" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 97–8). A person who wants to enter an already existing community, even one as small as the bond between two people, finds that objective spirit is already in place, and the two who are already on the inside interact with each other only by means of objective spirit.

In very Hegelian terms, Bonhoeffer describes objective spirit as the battleground between the past and the present moment, the site where the past turns meets the future. In Bonhoeffer's scheme, some principle of stability existing over-against particular persons existing in the struggle of temporality is necessary for community, since he has previously declared that "*the person ever and again arises and passes away in time*. The person does not exist timelessly; a person is not static, but dynamic. The person exists always and only in ethical responsibility; the person is re-created again and again in the perpetual flux of life." The person exists only in "the moment of being addressed," but in order for this address to take place, that is, in order for the person to be possible, there must be a means of communication between two persons (Bonhoeffer 1998, 48).<sup>2</sup> This means is, of course, language, which "combines the *objective intention of meaning* with its attendant *subjective emotion*, ultimately enabling empirical objectification and consolidation by sound and writing" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 69). Although language never takes on as large a role as those with (post)structuralist sympathies might hope, for Bonhoeffer, language is one of the most basic elements of objective spirit. Precisely as objective, it is "utterly ineradicable, whether by each individual or by all members together" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 100). A community cannot dispense with its objective spirit without ceasing to exist, and the same objective spirit that provides the conditions for their free interaction also has a will of its own that restrains that interaction (Bonhoeffer 1998, 99).

When defining his Christian concept of the person, Bonhoeffer criticizes idealist philosophy as being incapable of developing such a concept. This is curious, since his chapter on the primal state, in which the concept of objective spirit is most thoroughly investigated, is essentially a summary of idealist philosophy's discoveries in this regard. However, between the primal state and the communion of saints stands the problem of original sin. If not for the fall, idealist philosophy would be correct, but as it stands, "it has no *voluntaristic* concept of God, nor a profound concept of sin" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 148). Where Hegel sees the state as provided by Reason in history to maintain the conditions of freedom, Bonhoeffer sees a community that is irrevocably broken, among persons who "originate[] only in the absolute duality of God and humanity" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 49). In the primal state, even conflictual human interaction would be productive, just as in Hegel the conflict of opposites results in a higher unity, but in a direct swipe at Hegel's optimism, Bonhoeffer declares that "since the fall has there been no concrete and productive conflict in the genuine sense" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 85). Conflict still produces community, but it is the community of sinners, the community of those who are utterly alone (Bonhoeffer 1998, 108). In such a state of affairs, where human beings stand in radical judgment under and separation from God, an *a priori* assumption of the existence of Reason in history is unwarranted.

God enters into this situation of hopelessness in his revelation as Jesus Christ, and he creates the church, which is Christ existing as community. Even at this very early stage of his work, before the process of disillusionment brought on by the church's capitulation to Nazism, this definition of the church is not meant to be a piece of triumphalism. As Luca D'Isanto explains: "the proposition is meant to locate the place in which the divine reality, which showed itself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, can still show itself today" (D'Isanto 1992, 143). This is not merely a return to the primal state, since the existence of sin has rendered the location of the church ambiguous and all members of the church live both in the community of sin and the community of grace, both in Adam and in Christ. Unlike in Hegel, where the location of the community

created by God (Reason in history) is self-evident, for Bonhoeffer, the community is hidden.

It is at this point that one can begin to discuss a specifically Christian concept of objective spirit. As a community, the church does have objective spirit, and Bonhoeffer emphasizes that this spirit cannot be identified with God's spirit (Bonhoeffer 1998, 203, 214). The church's objective spirit guarantees a certain degree of continuity. Although the collective person of the church, having "the same structure as the individual person" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 77), is every bit as temporal as the individual person, Bonhoeffer confidently states that the "church of Jesus Christ that is actualized by the Holy Spirit is really the church here and now. The community of saints we have outlined is 'in the midst of us'" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 208). Still, the actions of the church are never simply the actions of God, as they would be if the objective spirit of the church was identical to the Holy Spirit—that, he says, "would amount to the Hegelian position" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 214), in which the status of the community would be a given. As human, the objective spirit of the church is subject to change over time and to influences from those who are outside the community, but as it is taken up by the Holy Spirit, it has a redemptive role to play: "The historical impact of the Spirit of Christ is at work in the form of the objective spirit in spite of all the sinfulness, historical contingency, and fallibility of the church; likewise the Holy Spirit uses the objective spirit as a vehicle for its gathering and sustaining social activity in spite of all the sinfulness and imperfection of the individuals and of the whole" (Bonhoeffer 1998, 215). The remainder of the book is an account of the institutions of the objective spirit of the church, laid out broadly along the lines of Hegel's account of the objective spirit of the modern state in *Philosophy of Spirit*—for example, the pair "individual congregation and universal church" is parallel to the pair "family and state," and his eschatology (such as it is) is parallel to Hegel's idea of universal history.

Bonhoeffer shows remarkable confidence in the ability of objective spirit, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to sustain the church in the face of its inadequate members. In a position that is remarkable given the essential place of preaching in the church, he even opens up the possibility that those "who, at least at that moment, do not

belong to the *sanctorum communio*” can preach the word effectively: “The fact that this preacher uses, and must use, forms shaped by the objective spirit means that the Holy Spirit is able to use that person as an instrument of the Spirit’s own work.” This is because “objective spirit not only consists of forms that have become fixed, but, just as much consists of the living power of public opinion, which means, for example, theology, or a strong resolve to tackle some kind of practical project, etc.” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 234–5). This broad definition of objective spirit might lead one to believe that the church is infallible, but Bonhoeffer guards his ecclesiology from triumphalism: “We believe in the church not as an ideal that is unattainable or yet to be fulfilled, but as a present reality. . . . And yet within its historical development it never knows a state of fulfillment. It will remain impure as long as there is a history, and yet in this concrete form it is nevertheless God’s church-community” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 280–1). The emphasis is not on the church’s inherent righteousness—after all, “[t]here is no sociological structure that is holy as such, and equally there is no structure that would cut off all avenues for the word” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 269)—but rather on God’s faithfulness to the church. God’s faithfulness does not mean that the boundary between God and humanity is erased, and so the objective spirit of the church is still “subject to the historical ambiguity of all profane communities” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 216). It is this ambiguity that will prove to be the key factor in Bonhoeffer’s later investigations into the Christian concept of objective spirit.

### III. Objective Spirit through the Letters and Papers from Prison

As previously noted, one should not expect to find the term “objective spirit” in the later work for which Bonhoeffer is most famous. Aside from considerations of audience, genre, and context, his steadily increasing polemic against idealism explains his reluctance to use terms associated with Hegel, to the point where *The Cost of Discipleship* seldom mentions the work of the Holy “Spirit.” The conceptual space denoted in *Sanctorum Communio* by the term “objective spirit” does, however, remain prominent in Bonhoeffer’s thinking—in fact, by the time of the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, it constitutes the central problem of his theology, a problem he was unable to solve before his death. A complete review of his works is inappropriate in this context,

but a brief analysis of the place of objective spirit in *Christ the Center* and *The Cost of Discipleship* should suffice to illustrate Bonhoeffer's continued engagement with the concept.

*Christ the Center* is a Christology that continually slips into ecclesiology. He emphasizes the continued, concrete presence of Christ in the world: "One cannot avoid encounter with the person of Christ because he is alive" (Bonhoeffer 1978, 34). By this he means not that every person has a Damascus Road experience, but rather that Christ continues to exist as word, as sacrament, and as community (Bonhoeffer 1978, 46). Clearly, here the basic theological insight of *Sanctorum Communio*, that the church is Christ existing as community, is at work, and his analysis of the structure of the person and the church in that work repeats itself here in many ways. He conceives Christ's existence *pro me* as an address, and that address necessitates the objective spirit of a human community in order to be intelligible: "the divine Logos enters the human logos." Just as in *Sanctorum Communio*, the divine Logos never becomes identified with the human logos it enters. It remains the case, however, that "[t]ruth happens only in community," and the historical, contingent nature of God's revelation in Christ means that it happens only in a specific, contingent community, namely the church (Bonhoeffer 1978, 49–50).

Thus, in a move that seems bizarre in the age of historical criticism, Bonhoeffer's section on "The Historical Christ" declares that "[t]he Christ who is preached is the historical Christ," and that means the Christ who has been preached by the Christian tradition. Not only is the "quest of the historical Jesus . . . a blind alley," but so also is the quest to find out simply what the Bible says about Jesus (Bonhoeffer 1978, 71). Instead of the methods of historical criticism, it is the objective spirit of the church, represented here by the orthodox Christology established by the classical church, that keeps open the space for encounter with Christ by excluding heresy. An interesting thing happens here, however. The very heresies that are excluded prove to be continual temptations for later theologians—Docetism in particular is "as old as Christianity itself" and "still lives in the present" (Bonhoeffer 1978, 76). Keeping in mind that for Bonhoeffer, objective spirit is established simultaneously with the community and is indestructible once it is established, one can conclude that

heresy itself is part of the objective spirit of the church-community. Whereas in *Sanctorum Communio*, we read only vague assertions of the ambiguity of objective spirit, here we have obstacles to encounter with Christ included in objective spirit.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer presents an even greater paradox: correct doctrine itself becomes an obstacle to encounter with Christ. He still acknowledges that the church is Christ existing as community and that as such, “the Word of God is to be heard in the preaching which goes on in our church.” Still, something has gone awry: “The real trouble is that the pure Word of God has been overlaid with so much human ballast—burdensome rules and regulations, false hopes and consolations—that it has become extremely difficult to make a genuine decision for Christ. . . . [I]t is not the fault of our critics that they find our preaching so hard to understand, so overburdened with ideas and expressions which are hopelessly out of touch with the mental climate in which they live” (Bonhoeffer 1995, 35). His chapter on “Cheap Grace” details the many ways in which the true elements of Reformation doctrine have become stumbling blocks on the way to true discipleship. Here he seems to be on the verge of the anti-traditionalism that has ravaged certain sectors of the contemporary American evangelical church—when Bonhoeffer referred to the “dangers” he perceived in the work, this was likely among them (Bonhoeffer 1971, 369). Yet just when a decisive break with his previous theology seems to be in evidence, just when it seems that the Christian community must be reestablished from scratch, he includes a chapter on the structure of the church that largely duplicates the materials and arguments found in *Sanctorum Communio*, albeit in less academic terms. The individual called by Christ is called into a community, and that community still has access to scripture and Luther, preaching and sacrament. The discipleship envisioned in this work stands in continuity with the historical church—the essential difference from Christianity as it is usually practiced is a greater vigilance in avoiding self-serving interpretations of the gospel that allow the believer to explain away her complicity and inaction in the face of sin.

Up to this point, the continuation of the church has never seriously been called into question. *The Cost of Discipleship* raises the

possibility that the world, despite all its good intentions and openness to the gospel message, will be discouraged and put off by the church's internecine struggles, but the specific reasons why this may be are not explored at length. This situation changes in the *Letters and Papers from Prison*: "Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the 'religious *a priori*' of mankind. 'Christianity' has always been a form—perhaps the true form—of 'religion.' But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all . . . —and I think that that is already more or less the case . . . —what does that mean for 'Christianity?'" Again, as with heresy, we have something that has been with the church from the beginning, but instead of being a persistent temptation, "religion" is the foundation of the comprehensibility of Christian preaching—seemingly the very deepest level of the objective spirit itself. Even worse, if "religion" must be preserved in order for Christianity to continue, then there are serious questions about whether Christianity is worth saving: "there remain only a few 'last survivors of the age of chivalry,' or a few intellectually dishonest people, on whom we can descend as 'religious.' Are they to be the chosen few?" Even Karl Barth, who first drew attention to the problem of "religion," failed in Bonhoeffer's eyes to answer the challenge adequately (Bonhoeffer 1971, 280). Clearly, though, Bonhoeffer still maintains his belief in God, and beyond that, he still believes in the church and makes extensive use of scripture. His basic theological grammar is still determined by his decisive insight that the church is Christ existing as community, so that immediately after saying that "God is beyond in the midst of our life," he adds as a natural conclusion, "The church stands, not at the boundaries where human powers give out, but in the middle of the village" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 282). For Bonhoeffer, people will still enter into and participate in the church, because the church remains the place where God happens.

Bonhoeffer suggests that ridding the church of its reliance on "religion" is a chance to repeat Paul's liberating move of removing circumcision as a requirement for church membership (Bonhoeffer 1971, 281). In Paul's time, the exclusively Jewish nature of the emerging faith meant that circumcision had been implicitly required from the very beginning—that is, it was a self-evident part of the objective spirit of the church, and anyone wishing to enter into the church com-

munity would have to relate herself to that objective spirit. What Paul instituted was a decisive change in the objective spirit of the church in order to remain faithful to the church's mission to be God's community. Precisely because he was such a radical Jew, Paul was specially positioned to make this move—similarly, precisely because he was such a conservative and such a traditionalist on matters of doctrine, Bonhoeffer is able to announce a radical rethinking of the place of the church in the world. At the same time that he attacks the main methods of Christian apologetic as “in the first place pointless, in the second place ignoble, and in the third place unchristian” (Bonhoeffer 1971, 327), he proceeds as though the idea of dispensing with the Bible, for example, had never occurred to him.

Shifts, even radical shifts, in the objective spirit of the church are legitimate because objective spirit is not finally the point. The church must have objective spirit in order to be identifiable across time and space (Bonhoeffer 1998, 209). The goal of God's work in the church, however, is not simply to create and maintain a particular cultural tradition, but rather to create a community that, like Christ, exists for others (Bonhoeffer 1971, 381). In his “Outline for a Book,” Bonhoeffer suggests that in order to start existing for others, the church “should give away all its property to those in need” (Bonhoeffer 1971, 382). The specific context of these remarks indicates that he means physical property, but one can easily extend this to conceptual property as well—just as the church should have no building to call its own, so also it should have no conceptual apparatus to call its own. In the last resort, “religion” is the attempt to win for Christianity a particular conceptual home within the kingdom of the modern world, which repeats the error of monasticism and of “cheap grace” (Surin 1985, 384–5). As Bonhoeffer notes in *Sanctorum Communio*, the church always exists within both the collective person of Adam and the collective person of Christ. Everything contained in the objective spirit of the church already belongs entirely to the world, and it is clear that Bonhoeffer regards “religion” primarily as the church's way of relating itself to the world. Now, however, a “world come of age” needs a church come of age; no matter what relations previously obtained, Christians are now called “to recognize that we are fully responsible for what goes on in our lives and our world, not attempting to push off

onto God those responsibilities which formerly were not ours but now are" (Bube 1971, 213). All that remains is to determine the specific forms Christianity must take in the new religionless world.

#### IV. Bonhoeffer and Social Critique

Bonhoeffer has few directives in his letters for the church in the situation of religionlessness. He alludes to the non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts (Bonhoeffer 1971, 329 *et passim*), but his personal circumstances impede him from providing any concrete examples thereof. Most of the rest of his references to the activities of the church center on coming to recognize the extent of the problem. In reflecting on the possibilities open to the church, he sees only the attempted return to the Middle Ages, which would be intellectually dishonest, and the way "through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 360). The Confessing Church, in his view, has partially succumbed to the temptation to return to the Middle Ages, but the real work of the church now is to ask, "Well then, what do we really believe?" He includes his own answers immediately after the question: belief in a God who is transcendent due to his being for others, the interpretation of the Bible along those lines, a reinterpretation of "cultus" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 381–2). There is no question for Bonhoeffer that the church will remain identifiably Christian, and even Protestant.

There is some question, however, of whether Bonhoeffer is being somewhat naïve about the "world come of age." Kenneth Surin cites the scathing critiques of psychotherapists and existential philosophers as evidence that Bonhoeffer does not have an adequate critique of the world. If the church is truly going to evacuate the zone of "religion," he argues, then it will need an "immanent critique or deconstruction of this world," which for Surin is best provided by Adorno (Surin 1985, 397). Barry Harvey is in basic agreement with Surin and argues that the very idea of the "world come of age" must be read ironically in our present postmodern context, in which the "eschaton has slipped its leash, and humankind is left standing, empty-handed and dumb-founded. . . . [N]o *telos* beckons us" (Harvey 1997, 319). Interestingly, however, the new situation Harvey sees within the cultural logic of late capitalism is essentially the same as Bonhoeffer's conception of

the state of sin in *Sanctorum Communio*: a mass of isolated sinners, heading nowhere (Bonhoeffer 1998, 108). Similarly, Bonhoeffer's critique of the idea of "the mass" and other current sociological ideas show his healthy skepticism toward the modern world. It may be true that he claims in the letters to prefer the company of unreligious people, but it is also true that Christ preferred the company of sinners to that of Pharisees.

Bonhoeffer's work remains unsystematized and fragmentary, but his reflections in prison help to indicate the likely directions he would have taken in a hypothetical future systematization of the ideas that he had developed in his earlier theological work. If we read *Sanctorum Communio* and the *Letters and Paper from Prison* together, as part of the same basic theological project, Bonhoeffer's attempts to distance himself from idealism and from other forms of social theory appear within the frame of a worldly Christianity. Since the church is irreducibly in the world, the sociological structure of the church is already an "immanent critique or deconstruction of the world." Beyond that, Bonhoeffer's work provides the groundwork for a concrete practice, something that is too often lacking in the constantly proliferating critiques of the modern world. Though some might be understandably disappointed that his untimely death left the church with an unfinished ethics, a liturgy without a community, and a model of biblical interpretation without any examples, the incompleteness might work to the church's advantage. Perhaps the best way for Bonhoeffer himself to avoid the trap of a "positivism of revelation" was precisely by leaving the church with a set of useful concepts and provocative questions to grapple with in the process of working through modern problems for itself. In the end, he may give the church more by giving less—an already-assembled system can be adopted wholesale and just as easily discarded, but "one can never go back behind what one has worked out for oneself" (Bonhoeffer 1971, 387).

### Notes

1. The translation of Hegel that I used in preparing this paper translates *Geist* as "mind." Throughout, I alter the translation to "spirit" in order to conform to the usage of Bonhoeffer's translators.
2. All italics in quotations from Bonhoeffer's works are in the original.

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