The Bonhoeffer Legacy: An International Journal
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Response to Keith Clements, ‘Priorities for a Public Theology in a Time of Extremisms: Fresh Insights from Bonhoeffer’

Gordon Preece

Introduction

First, many thanks on behalf of the University of Divinity Centre for Research in Religion and Social Policy (RASP) to Keith Clements. Keith has provided a splendid and judicious paper that helps us see the continuing relevance of Bonhoeffer to the tectonic shifts of our times without hagiography or presenting him, or any single theologian, as providing the answer to all of them. Mark Lindsay¹ gave a challenging paper a few years ago in Adelaide that challenged the idea that Bonhoeffer could be called on as offering light for all causes, asking, for instance, just how he might possibly address the cosmic issue of climate change.² Keith has carefully avoided any excesses in this regard, in my view. My responses to his paper will be likewise modest and limited to its application to global issues of extremism from an Australian perspective.

When Keith Clements told me that he would use the image of ‘preservation’ in his address, my heart was strangely warmed. For I have long held, following Waleed Aly’s brilliant Quarterly Essay, What’s Right? The Future of Conservatism in Australia,³ that one of the great crimes of contemporary politics is in supplanting the notion of ‘conservative,’ in its classical sense of favouring small scale, organic change and growth over radical change, with finely tuned institutional checks and balances between government, business, civil society and individuals. The ‘crime’ takes the form of supplanting this with the rather utopian, (anti) social and ecological experiment referred to commonly as neo-liberalism.⁴ So, in this somewhat perilous and precarious historical moment, seeing Clements emphasising, not so much the Thomist ‘Grace Perfecting Nature’ model, but rather the more Lutheran notion of grace protecting and preserving nature, is timely and wise. It can also be read as a profound protest against political and eschatological extremisms today.

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². Dianne Rayson seemed to avoid this in her paper ‘Bonhoeffer and an Ecoethic to Address Climate Change’, at the 13th Annual Australian Bonhoeffer Conference 6 December 2017; it relates Bonhoeffer’s love of ‘Mother Earth’ to our enormous ecological challenges. Dr Rayson is also a Member of the University of Divinity Centre for Research in Religion and Social Policy (RASP).
⁴. In noting this, I am not intending to make a positive ‘conservative confession’, but merely to note the negative consequences of the increasingly commonplace and lazy conservative-neo-Liberal equation. I agree with Australian eco-theologian and activist Byron Smith that wanting our children and grandchildren to inherit an earth somewhat like the one we have now, is hardly radical, but conservative in both ecological and political senses.
This is the kind of action required by Bonhoeffer’s helpful distinction between the penultimate and ultimate. To quote Clements: ‘The holding together of a society threatened by violence, the making of steel or other basic commodities, the creation and preserving of beautiful art, are all penultimate things. In Bonhoefferian terms, they are not ends in themselves, nor are they substitutes for the ultimate, but in the light of the ultimate and for its sake, they merit preservation.’

Also, I suspect that we have, as Bonhoeffer discovered himself, much to learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters. Rather than using the more grandiose language of building the Kingdom, the Jewish Mishnaic, Rabbinic language of ‘Tikkun Ölam,’ repairing the world, ‘sticking fingers in the dykes’, holding the pre-Noah chaos at bay, may be a more modest and realistic way for God’s people to operate in the pluralistic world of the Gentiles. It can also provide a useful caution against today’s chaotic, disruptive form of capitalism, including its association with the form of swift technological change devoid of reflection on its consequences.

Below, I offer some thoughts on the four areas, democracy, human rights, institutions, and ‘the natural,’ to which Clements applies Bonhoeffer’s penultimate/ultimate distinction.

Democracy

I will respond according to Keith Clements’ order but I suspect it may not necessarily be the order of importance. Hence, Keith cites John de Gruchy’s positive South African perspective on the possibilities of democracy not limited to Churchill’s realistic, but perhaps complacent, ‘least-worst’ option.

Democracy, for de Gruchy, is an open process of robust conversation or ongoing, non-violent argument (as per McIntyre’s tradition as an ongoing argument?), based on human rights in the quest for justice. So, Human Rights might be seen as first in importance and therefore democracy and human rights would be woven together.

This is vital in relation to contemporary extremisms because, contrary to the United States stated justifications for much of its MiddleEastern intervention policies and wars, Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs show survival needs of security, shelter and food as priorities over those of democracy. The need for food (due to drought and possible climate change shortages) and for jobs was likely a more important motivator of the Arab Spring than were Facebook messages, despite the West’s technologically driven confusion over causes and means. Indeed, Facebook itself has recently been exposed as either naively exposed to or allied with Cambridge Analytica and its hijacking of 87 million people’s private information to focus ‘fake news’ upon their fears and so manipulate public moods and even elections. So much for the democratic potential of Facebook!

Keith Clements notes that during ecumenical discussions in the Second World War, Bonhoeffer expressed severe doubts as to whether a defeated Germany would be ready for democracy in the ‘AngloSaxon’ model. It would need an emergency period of authoritarian rule, in his view. This was not just a contextually based view but a theologically oriented one as well. ‘By establishing justice, and by the power of the sword, government preserves the world for the coming of Jesus Christ.’ It is provisional, penultimate, preservative. The irony today is that Germany can be said to be well ahead of most as both a prosperous democracy and one that deals well with a range of important contemporary social matters, including refugee intake, LGBTQI equality, and the renewal of an ageing population.

Furthermore, a mere mathematically majoritarian view of democracy is insufficient without a human rights based respect for the political, economic or sustenance rights of minorities, as well as for religious rights in general. Religious rights have diminished in many of the countries that the United States and

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allies have invaded, leading often to a power vacuum and a genocidal eruption aimed at many Middle Eastern minority groups, including Jews, Christians, and various Muslim sects.

Democracy is a penultimate and secular phenomenon, being part of the in-between now-and not yet time of God’s patience. In the year of the almost forgotten centenary of the 1917 Communist Revolution (apparently unnoticed in mainstream media except by the New Statesman’s Centenary Russian Revolution edition on 4 May 2017), we might reflect on Bonhoeffer’s mentor Karl Barth’s wariness of syncretistic Religious Socialism. Barth, once dubbed ‘the red pastor of Safenwil’, remained a a secular democratic socialist, proposing that God’s Greater Revolution, and the real Krisis that comes only with God’s judgment, is quite beyond both a political party’s victory at the polls and violent revolution.

To paraphrase Bonhoeffer, the penultimate is mightier than the sword, which is often wielded due to excessive and premature eschatological expectation. It is also mightier than the wrecking ball of deterministically justified teleological history: of Communism, of Joseph Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’ of Capitalism, or Francis Fukuyama’s Capitalism as the Great Disruption and ‘end of history’, etc. The penultimate is ‘mightier’ in the sense that it keeps open the possibility for God’s ultimate action. The temptation of humans to take decisive apocalyptic, final action is an attempt to justify those who see themselves as the advance guard of history, of an idea whose time has come. Compare Donald Trump’s former campaign advisor, Steve Bannon, and his Manichean media campaigns through Breitbart, culminating in his continuing campaign of disruption of government and civic institutions such as the Press, Judiciary, and even the FBI.

Populist leaders and causes cannot carry the bulk of the people with them into a process of democratic deliberation and discernment. Hence, we have already seen the problems of such deliberation when it boils down, ironically, to a binary ‘yes or no’ postal plebiscite (as exemplified in the recent Australian ‘same sex marriage’ plebiscite), instead of civil society engaging in face-to-face discernment and discussion. The latter carries the potential of restoring and enlarging something of the ancient notion of friendship and partnership in the polis. Thankfully, the euthanasia or assisted suicide debates in Australia (Victoria and NSW) in 2017 were as civil as the conversation that RASP conducted in June 2017 between Margaret Somerviele (Professor of Bioethics, Notre Dame University, Australia) and Peter Singer (Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University, USA) on assisted dying.

We need to avoid both the loose language of moral equivalence, where ‘all cats are black on a dark night’ but also the hard language of ‘black and white’ moral certitude. Both are related to a digital impatience and lack of due discrimination and discernment displayed in the blogosphere and their comments sections. The virtue of patience is a close cousin to that of hope. ‘Holding the hope’ is a term my wife uses when training and counselling carers of those with mental illness. It provides a helpful image for those of us struggling with the confusion and potential malaise of our troubling times. Patient hope is also appropriate to a penultimate time as a necessary political virtue for any who govern or engage in commerce, with a view to the long-term. In an Australian context of three-year election cycles, and permanent polling, short-term views have rendered us with ‘Poll-iticsians’ rather than politicians. Perpetual polling leads to nearsightedness and blinkered tunnel-vision. Think too of the focus on quarterly returns and stock exchange figures in the corporate world linked via share bonuses to outrageous CEO salaries. Pervasive and perverse incentives to financial advisers to mislead clients

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9. Barth started the ‘Theology of Krisis’ movement which stressed the ultimate and Greater Revolution of God’s Judgement in condemnation of both Left and Right (despite his own Leftist sympathies) immediately after the First World War and Russian Revolution. Barth comments on Paul’s stress on our constant living and dying in the Lord (Rom 14:7): that ‘there is only life under His judgement and under His promise . . . under KRISIS.’ Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C Hoskyns, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), citing 512, cf 502–3.

to buy inhouse products, and fees charged for no service, as exposed by the current Banking Inquiry, are almost the final straw.

Human Rights

Bonhoeffer is eloquent and expansive on human rights. Proverbs 31:8 ‘Open your mouth for the dumb’ 11 becomes a veritable leitmotif as the Nazi persecutions and executions of Jews, dissidents and the so-called physical and mental defectives through euthanasia began. He influenced, as Keith Clements notes, the founder of Amnesty International, the late Peter Benenson. Bonhoeffer upholds human rights on natural and theological grounds. God is the origin and safeguard of natural life against ‘the secularization of human rights’ and welfare. We must ‘defend a right in such a way as to make it credible that God, not the individual, is standing up for the right’. 12

Sadly, in Australia, some conservative groups, including Christian and other religious ones, successfully opposed Father Frank Brennan’s attempted national Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities on behalf of the Rudd Labor government (2007–2010). This left Australia, lamentably, as the only Western democracy without a Human Rights Charter. Its deficit leads us to re-drawing the wheel with much fire and little light on numerous human rights issues like those of indigenous people, refugees, modern slaves, 13 religious liberty, freedom of speech and conscience, etc.

Many Christians suffer apparent amnesia regarding the religious pedigree of human rights, swallowing the secularist narrative that the concept of human rights is a child of the Enlightenment, not religion. This has occurred in spite of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights 14 having had significant Judeo-Christian input. There is understandable wariness of conservative Christians regarding activist judges using a human rights charter against them. But in Australia, this has also understandably come to be seen as hypocritical and self-interested, granted their cries for protection of rights to religious freedom have proliferated since the gay marriage plebiscite of 2017. Human rights, including religious and sexual minority rights, should be treated as indivisible, neither a competition nor zero sum game.

The rejection of a national human rights charter has thus been a great example of Australian churches ‘shooting themselves in the foot’ to defend themselves in the culture wars against secular humanism. Instead, one might suggest they should have taken the high moral ground, with Bonhoeffer, of incarnational Christian humanism as a rationale for protection of human dignity and intrinsic human rights and responsibilities.

Without this high ground, Peter Singer and one of his philosophical ancestors, Jeremy Bentham, whose utilitarianism arose near the time of white settlement in Australia, have given Australian moral deliberation a distinctly consequentialist colouring. 15 Bentham dismissed the language of human rights as ‘nonsense on stilts’. Without the religious roots of human rights language in the high humanism or ‘stilts’ of our intrinsic human status as made in God’s image (not diminishing the rights of animals or the environment), they are less defensible. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s Justice: Right and Wrong 16 clearly shows how human rights have biblical, Catholic canon law, as well as broader natural law grounding.

Institutions

I also found Keith Clements’ use of the unfashionable ‘I’ word, Institutions, invigorating. One of the distinguishing marks of the rising tide of totalitarianism is seen in the insidious attack on institutions. Many associate totalitarianism with institutions but, in fact, independent institutions of law, professions, academia, business, are the very opposite of totalitarian. Attacks or takeovers of institutions occur not only from the Left but more recently from the Right, and not just as a one-off, radical Revolution, but taking the form of a ‘long march through the institutions’. We see attacks on liberal political institutions increasingly from President Trump’s attacks on the courts, the ‘fake’ media, national security organisations like the FBI, to the Philippines’ President Duterte’s arbitrary vigilante justice against alleged drug users and dealers. Locally, we saw it in the apparently contemptuous attacks by several Federal ministers on the courts in 2017 regarding ‘soft’ sentences for suspected terrorists.

Bonhoeffer’s upholding of the integrity of institutions still speaks to us, for instance, regarding the current controversy about Euthanasia and Assisted Dying, now approved by the government of Victoria. I agree with Margaret Somerville that this absolutizing of individual autonomy represents a major and risky revolution in our understanding of the two institutions historically charged with the preservation of human life, namely Law and Medicine.

Like Bonhoeffer’s links with the Abwehr or German Army Intelligence, we need to uphold these institutions and professions and their purposes, and the kind of specific, specialised and common good they patiently seek, however imperfectly, in their spheres. We need their mediation between the giant powers of the Corporate State and the isolated, naked individual, abandoned in the public square or marketplace when left unclothed by Town Hall and Cathedral, now overshadowed by the tottering bank towers of Babel.

Keith Clements, interestingly and inclusively, points to examples of the churches and mosques being, if not the first responders after the Grenfell Towers fire disaster in London, then the first repairers to whom the government then appealed to repair the social fabric. This is like the cross-continental situation in the U.S. after Cyclone Katrina battered New Orleans in 2005 and George W Bush’s government failed dismally in its response. In contrast, it was the churches, synagogues and local municipal parishes of New Orleans’ civil society that were crucial to stemming severe social erosion and ecological chaos. This is no claim to a monopoly of mercy, nor primarily a swipe against governments which, it must be remembered, were critical to holding the churches to account over their institutional abuse crises. Nonetheless, I am affirming the critical mediating and repairing role of shared humanity and civil society, expressed through our varied vocational, institutional and religious responsibilities.

The Natural

This capacious category includes both the human and wider world for Bonhoeffer. He personally had a great love, as many Germans of the time did, of the outdoors and physical activity. The more he read the Hebrew Bible, the more he appreciated its earthiness and the more he spoke positively of Mother Earth. Humans originating from the earth and destined to return to the dust are in effect ecologically connected, kin with creation.

Obviously, Bonhoeffer was not aware of our current ecological crisis but Dianne Rayson’s recent PhD thesis on Bonhoeffer and Climate Change offers plenty of fuel for the ecological cause. Bonhoeffer’s natural joy in bodily exertion and sport is grounded in appreciation of the penultimate

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17. Joseph A Buttigieg, editor of Gramsci’s Prison Note-Books (year, 50n21) asserts: ‘This phrase is not [Italian Marxist Antonia] Gramsci’s, even though it is ubiquitously attributed to him’. Perhaps this was through his contemporaneity with the Long March of the Chinese Communist Red Army in 1934–35. It was popularized in the 1968 Paris Protests, by university activist Rudi Dutschke and in his posthumous 1980 book, Mein longer Marsch.


value of bodily connection to the earth. Only the Christian, ‘not the “ethical” man’, he says, can enjoy the earth, the natural and cultural in a carefree way, without an uneasy mind.\textsuperscript{20} We may have more mixed feelings today, but ecological endeavour and preventative and emergency action can only be sustainably grounded in an awe-inspired appreciation of our natural grounding.

Bonhoeffer answers his own question how it can be that ‘the penultimate will be swallowed up by the ultimate, yet . . . retains its legitimacy and its integrity? As long as the earth endures!’ he states emphatically.\textsuperscript{21} Mistakes of idealistic, eschatological impatience are easy to pick after the event. One instance may be East German Lutheran pastor’s daughter Angela Merkel well-meaning and courageous, but perhaps not thoroughly thought-out or consultatively executed, grand gesture regarding refugees. It might be that this action moved too far ahead of the pace of grace in her own and wider European populations, and led to strong reactions from the extreme Right, almost costing her the ability to form government. Another example is Giles Fraser, former Canon Chancellor (2009–11) of St Paul’s and Guardian columnist’s impassioned but impatient call to build apartments in the Greenbelt to house unlimited numbers of refugees and ignore concerned cries for preserving England’s ‘green and pleasant land’.\textsuperscript{22} This was utopian and neglectful of the natural and the importance of a penultimate sense of place to people,\textsuperscript{23} a sense of home from which to be hospitable.

**Conclusion**

These examples of somewhat utopian universalism are opposed by the other exclusively penultimate and parochial extreme. The language of exclusive national self-interest and security is used with abandon, especially by Donald Trump in his abrupt banning of various Middle Eastern nationals and his bizarre wall-building quest to keep Central and South Americans out of the United States In Australia, right-wing Christians, Tony Abbott, Scott Morrison and Peter Dutton, have forced liberal Malcolm Turnbull to continue to block the boats and condemn refugees not to an island paradise but to a permanent purgatorial prison or limbo. Refugees have been shown by the Pentagon to be far from the United State’s, or the world’s, greatest security threat. Their studies show that the greatest threat is in fact climate change. This too represents a profound neglecting of nature. It also forgets that Bonhoeffer, hero to the selective view of some on the Right, was a sometime people-smuggler, ferrying Jews to Switzerland on behalf of the Abwehr.

These are just a few examples of how Keith Clements’ perceptive and wise reading of Bonhoeffer might be applied to contemporary global issues from a largely though not exclusively Australian perspective, without holding him accountable for any of my views or biases.

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\textsuperscript{21} Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 6*, 167f.


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