

Review of Eleanor McLaughlin, *Unconscious Christianity in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Late Theology: Encounters with the Unknown Christ* (London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020).

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What does it mean to be considered, or to consider oneself a Christian? Does someone have to identify as Christian or even engage consciously with Jesus Christ in order to consider themselves, or be considered, a Christian?

Eleanor McLaughlin sets out how Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the final years of his life, started to consider and explore the outlines of the proposition that a person could be a Christian without consciously engaging with Jesus Christ. McLaughlin's careful, methodical, and contextual examination of the sparse textual evidence is commendable and provides some thought provoking suggestions on the ambit of Bonhoeffer's thinking on this theological question.

The book is structured in two parts and contains a comprehensive and helpful introduction in which the author sets out the structure of her book and the main arguments as well as providing an overview of how unconscious Christianity is to be distinguished from Karl Rahner's concept of the Anonymous Christian. In Part I of the book, McLaughlin begins by situating Bonhoeffer's thinking on this topic within the important context of his membership of the *Bürgertum*, i.e., that group of German society who saw themselves as willing to build community and provide responsible leadership of their community. McLaughlin then outlines the four instances in his texts in which Bonhoeffer mentions unconscious Christianity and which provide the basis and substance for her working definition and discussion.



First, he mentions it in the margins of the manuscript to his essay "Ultimate and Penultimate Things" in his work *Ethics*.<sup>1</sup> McLaughlin argues that his scribble of "unbewußtes Christentum" in the margins of the manuscript of this essay is in fact a description of the people that he is describing in that essay. These, for Bonhoeffer, are people who "would no longer dare to call themselves Christians" but who should, because of who they are and what they do, "be claimed for Jesus Christ" (65).

Second, he mentions it in his fictional work, *Novel*, in which the young characters discuss their own parents and reflect that, whilst they do not go to church and would not be described as Christians "in the customary sense", they are more like Christians because "without knowing it and certainly without talking about it, in truth they still base their lives on Christianity, an unconscious Christianity" (68). McLaughlin's treatment of Bonhoeffer's fictional work as theological is also here important as it underpins her argument that it is a significant resource for understanding his theological ideas.

Third, he mentions it in a letter to his good friend Eberhard Bethge and, fourthly, in some notes he made before writing an outline for a new book. In his letter to Bethge, it is the way in which Bonhoeffer presents unconscious Christianity as a theological theme that broadens its significance beyond the fictional theological discussion in *Novel*. Regarding the mention of unconscious Christianity in the book outline, McLaughlin argues that Bonhoeffer links his idea of unconscious Christianity to the actions performed by those called righteous by Jesus in Matthew 25.

In relation to each of these instances, McLaughlin takes care to outline and emphasise the importance of noting the different contexts in which these texts were written, thereby emphasising the importance of situating the written evidence of his thinking on unconscious Christianity within the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which the texts were created. Apart from the reference in *Ethics*, all other references were made during his time in Tegel Prison, shortly before his murder by the Nazis. Her careful analysis also enables her to point out the somewhat fluid outlines and potential internal inconsistencies of Bonhoeffer's thinking on the topic of unconscious Christianity.

Despite the problems and apparent tensions in the evidence on Bonhoeffer's thinking on unconscious Christianity, McLaughlin concludes Part I of her book with her own working definition of Bonhoeffer's theory of unconscious Christianity. She proposes, taking all the evidence together, that for Bonhoeffer:

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 6*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Scott, German edition ed. Ilse Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, English edition ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 146-70 (see fn. 111).

Unconscious Christianity refers to the whole body of good people who have encountered Christ without being aware of it and do not self identify as Christians. In addition they may fulfil any of these six criteria (1) to have faith without knowing it, (2) to be selfless and participate in Jesus's being-for others, (3) to not seek to be other than what they are, (4) to value the penultimate, (5) to perform acts of faith without reflecting on them, (6) to be a member of the *Bürgertum* (95).

Working definitions are often assumed to demarcate the parameters of a concept and sometimes take on a life of their own. There is therefore a danger in recognising any working definition without also appreciating and giving sufficient weight to the complexity and richness of the underlying analysis. Whilst McLaughlin emphasises the importance of recognising the apparent contradictions and developing nature of Bonhoeffer's thinking on this topic, it is perhaps only in her use of the words "may fulfil any of these six criteria" in her definition that this fluidity is recognised. Any use of the definition for the purposes of conversation on this topic must therefore also expressly embrace the assumption that Bonhoeffer might have, had he not been murdered by the Nazis in April 1945, developed his thinking on this topic further.

In Part II of her book McLaughlin brings her definition into conversation with other writing and work by Bonhoeffer (such as his seminal work on "World Come of Age"). She engages with the work of other Bonhoeffer scholars such as Eberhardt Bethge and Ferdinand Schlingensiepen. Although her analysis within the context of the work of these other theologians is brief, it is insightful, and they act as valuable counterpoints to her own thinking.

Of particular relevance is the way in which McLaughlin unpacks Bonhoeffer's unconscious Christianity as a means of understanding how his own theology shifted in focus in response to his personal, physical, and imprisoned circumstances (147-54). She argues that, as Bonhoeffer begins to consider that it is possible for humans to engage with Christ unconsciously, he recognises that those whom he would otherwise have considered outside the Church are now part of the Church. In the final years of his life, Bonhoeffer, imprisoned in Tegel Prison, would have been living with the brutal realisation of the failure of German Christians and the church to organise any effective opposition to the Nazi's rule. Supported in prison by people who may not have identified as Christian, and so were officially outside the church, he would have sought to understand how these people fitted into his theological understanding. As McLaughlin states, and which has particular resonance for us as we consider what it means to respond to those in need in times of crisis: "Acts of selfless love and being-for-others, with no references to Christ, are now [for Bonhoeffer] indicators of Christianity and of belonging in the Christian community" (169).

Whilst McLaughlin's proposed definition is carefully caveated, there remains an inherent danger, not least to inter-faith dialogue and relations, in claiming someone is "so good" or has acted so selflessly, that they therefore must be Christian and claimed by the Church. Although she alludes to this potential difficulty, a more in-depth exploration of the dangers of the idea of unconscious

Christianity would be valuable, particularly as a counterweight to her excellent suggestions of the wider practical theological implications of this definition for the church today.

McLaughlin's work provides ample material for further discussion. Whilst she examines unconscious Christianity as a shift within Bonhoeffer's theology, it would be valuable to engage McLaughlin's definition with other areas of Bonhoeffer's theology such as his soteriology and his work on "costly Grace". How can a doctrine of Christianity that on the one hand enfolds and names as "Christian" someone who has not consciously chosen to follow Christ also hold within it an understanding that the Grace of God is costly, "not cheap" because "it calls to discipleship", to "follow *Jesus Christ*", and "costs people their lives"?<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer's doctrine of costly Grace emphasises the personal sacrifices that have to be made in order to receive God's grace and the Christological and reciprocal nature of such sacrifice. Where does the person who does not consciously engage with Christ, who is yet claimed by a loving Christ, fit into Bonhoeffer's views on Salvation and costly Grace?

These questions aside, the important point to remember is that McLaughlin's stated aim in writing this book is not to provide answers around what constitutes unconscious Christianity but to set the stage for such conversations to take place. For scholars of Bonhoeffer, it is her careful and reasoned methodology that is of such value, both in terms of what she contributes to the field but also in how she demonstrates clear, articulate scholarship.

Rowan Williams, in the foreword to the book, praises McLaughlin's work on this new topic as providing "outstandingly clear and persuasive readings of Bonhoeffer's texts" as well as "fresh and valuable insight into Bonhoeffer's poetry and fiction" (ix-x). McLaughlin has indeed achieved what she has set out to do: by providing a coherent and well-reasoned exploration of Bonhoeffer's work on this topic of unconscious Christianity, she invites us to engage once more in the question, more pertinent as we see ever increasing pockets of secularisation in Western society, of "Who is Christ for us today?" (167). McLaughlin reminds and emphasises afresh how valuable Bonhoeffer's relentless pursuit to theologically understand his lived reality is to us today. And this, right down to his marginal scribbles.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Volume 4*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, German edition ed. Martin Kuske and Isle Tödt, English edition ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 43-5.