

BOOK REVIEW

Eleanor McLaughlin, *Unconscious Christianity in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Late Theology: Encounters with the Unknown Christ*. London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020, 210 pp. \$95.00/£73.00

Originality in Bonhoeffer studies is no small achievement these days, yet in placing Bonhoeffer's tantalizing allusions to 'unconscious Christianity' center stage, Eleanor McLaughlin offers a notable contribution to the field that in turn stimulates thinking around broader issues for contemporary Christianity. There are four quite different references to unconscious Christianity (*Unbewußtes Christentum*) in Bonhoeffer's corpus overall, all of them from the last few years of his life, and they are scattered across four different texts: a chapter in *Ethics*, a letter to Eberhard Bethge, notes planning a book and the unfinished *Novel*. McLaughlin is clear in her belief that there is a genuinely robust concept under development here, even if – like much of Bonhoeffer's later thought – we are left wondering how it may have developed had he not been executed in 1945. As it stands, we witness Bonhoeffer exploring whether people who do not self-identify as Christian can be said to encounter Christ, to possess a faith of some kind, and to participate in Christ's own being for us. While acknowledging other scholars' engagements with the idea, McLaughlin argues that there exists no full definition of unconscious Christianity that adequately draws on all four texts. Her attentive and careful explorations of each mention of unconscious Christianity make this a valuable study indeed.

Early on, McLaughlin deftly distinguishes unconscious Christianity from Rahner's anonymous Christianity. Despite some 'kinship' (p. 12) there are significant differences, not least Bonhoeffer's sharper christological focus, and the dissimilarity when it comes to humanity's relationship with the transcendent in modern society. Following this, Part One examines Bonhoeffer's particular background as a member of the *Bürgertum* (the German 'educated middle class'). This, McLaughlin argues, is a crucial element in the development of unconscious Christianity, and is important for understanding the settings of Bonhoeffer's fictional writing in which he explores the idea. Having set this scene, she sharpens the focus onto the four references to unconscious Christianity, drawing the elements together into a definition (see below). Part Two places this definition into the contexts of Bonhoeffer's later theology and of Bonhoeffer scholarship, before arguing that the concept marks some important shifts in his

thought. McLaughlin's conclusion explores how her definition of unconscious Christianity might inform contemporary conversations around religious self-identification, secularization and church decline.

Throughout, McLaughlin offers a compelling case for reading Bonhoeffer's fiction as theological writing that indicates something important about how he was choosing to 'do' theology towards the end of his life. Not only do *Novel* and *Story* in particular contain important theological themes and terminology, but also the form itself is an outworking of Bonhoeffer's desire to find 'non-religious' ways of expressing theological truths. She states, '*Story* is Bonhoeffer's first effort at speaking entirely non-religiously of God, uncovering the godlessness of the world, and proclaiming its coming of age' (p. 108). There is perhaps a certain irony in seeking to theologically decode (or re-code) Bonhoeffer's fiction if it is indeed an attempt to speak theologically without using recognizably theological language. Nevertheless, McLaughlin convincingly maintains the theological import of the fiction, encouraging other scholars to engage more consistently with those particular writings.

Central to the book is McLaughlin's definition of unconscious Christianity as pertaining to 'a body of good people who have encountered Christ without being aware of it and do not self-identify as Christians' (p. 95). Under this heading are six further characteristics, drawn from across the four texts, some or all of which may be fulfilled by those called unconscious Christians: (i) having faith without knowing it, (ii) selfless participation in Jesus's being for others, (iii) not seeking to be other than they are, (iv) valuing the penultimate in the light of the ultimate (cf. *Ethics*), (v) performing acts of faith without reflecting on them, and (vi) membership of the *Bürgertum*.

Concerning the last of these, McLaughlin argues that Bonhoeffer's educated-middle-class background is a cradle for his ideas about unconscious Christianity, especially regarding a *bürgerlich* sense of social responsibility that can constitute an unwittingly Christ-like being-for-others, alongside a groundedness that neutralizes false ambition. This background is particularly discernable in his fiction. Nevertheless, the *Bürgertum* recedes in importance as the picture of unconscious Christianity takes shape. Certain characteristics contained under the heading remain, but any implication that *bürgerlich* Germans simply are unconscious Christians is not carried forward. Ultimately this is to the concept's advantage, the potential for anachronistic classism being hard to shake. Indeed McLaughlin notes Bonhoeffer's awareness of the challenges the gospel poses to the idea of any kind of inherently 'Christian' class.

Other aspects of unconscious Christianity cohere with more common themes in Bonhoeffer scholarship. McLaughlin argues that some of the ideas for which Bonhoeffer is most well-known – for example, 'religionless Christianity in a world come of age' – can be more properly understood when one grasps what unconscious Christianity was beginning to mean for him. She is persuasive when suggesting that the concept marks a 'shift' in Bonhoeffer's thought consistent with the direction of the prison letters, in particular that it 'alters

... his view of the relationship between Christianity and self-identification' (p. 140). In this notable alteration, she links not only to the theological world-view that Bonhoeffer was developing, but also to the impact of the changes in his personal relationships: from 'being surrounded by Confessing Church members' to being 'increasingly involved with members of the resistance movement, who do not self-identify as Christians' (p. 150). We are reminded of Bonhoeffer's willingness to allow his theology to be developed by the relationships and events that surrounded him.

Unconscious Christianity, therefore, is a product of Bonhoeffer's 'world come of age' – a 'tipping point, after which Christianity can evolve into new, hitherto unimagined forms' (p. 107). Whilst unconscious Christians have undoubtedly been present throughout Christian history, it is only with the shedding of cultural religiosity, and abandoning of the God who functions as the answer to all humanity's problems, that unconscious Christianity takes shape as an identifiable phenomenon. McLaughlin therefore draws to the surface links between the emerging idea of unconscious Christianity and Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity in a world come of age'. Her clear and thorough summaries offer welcome clarifications that will no doubt contribute to further scholarship.

The centrality of encounter with Christ in Bonhoeffer's theology overall is enough for McLaughlin to presume that such encounter is fundamental to unconscious Christianity, even if 'the precise causal relationship between the encounter with Christ and the actions carried out by the unconscious Christianity is somewhat unclear' (p. 92). In particular, the focus on encounter with Christ follows Bonhoeffer's marginal reference to Matthew 25 in 'outline to a book', where the righteous are unaware that their presence with and generosity to the hungry, thirsty and imprisoned is indeed presence to Christ himself. The concept thus contains an assumption of righteousness before God in those who are not self-identifying Christians. Thus, openness to the possibility of unconscious Christianity is a way of taking seriously how Bonhoeffer saw being for others as a crucial and deeply theological form of religionless discipleship in a world come of age.

Perhaps the most notable issue raised by this study concerns the practice of naming as 'Christians' those who do not self-identify as such. Looming large over Bonhoeffer's unconscious Christianity as outlined here is the notion that, as he puts it in *Ethics*, there is a group of people who can or should be 'claimed for Christ' by Christians, despite not identifying themselves as such. McLaughlin's conclusion suggests that this dimension of unconscious Christianity can be helpful for Christians seeking a more hopeful account of the world in the light of secularism and church decline – for example, in taking the pressure off self-identifying Christians as bearing the sole responsibility of perpetuating Christianity in the world (p. 190) – but, one might ask, at what cost? Does not the urge to label a swathe of people as 'Christians' for the sake of a more positive account of 'Christianity' come close to the religious self-preservation

that Bonhoeffer elsewhere decries? McLaughlin does amplify the voices of those who are troubled by the notion that one simply calls people ‘Christian’ when they themselves never have, and she openly acknowledges that a deft navigation of paternalistic pitfalls would be necessary in carrying the concept forward. Nevertheless, that Bonhoeffer was only beginning to think through ‘unconscious Christianity’, perhaps invites a more critical approach to his thinking on this matter in particular. For example, in carrying Bonhoeffer’s idea forward, might one in the end need to rethink the term itself? Might ‘unconscious faithfulness to Christ’ do a slightly more theologically consistent job, centralizing Jesus Christ himself at the heart of things as Bonhoeffer himself so often does?

Those seeking to explore these questions owe McLaughlin a debt of gratitude. The detail and perspicuity in her well-structured and deep study will allow such conversations to progress with a full and nuanced picture of Bonhoeffer’s thinking with regard to this issue.

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