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A Tale of Two Bonhoeffers?  
Ronald Gregor Smith, J. A. T. Robinson,  
and the Dissemination of Bonhoeffer in the  
English Speaking World

Keith W. Clements

The transmission of the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the English-speaking world in the 1950s and 1960s owed a unique debt to two British theologians: Ronald Gregor Smith (1913–68) and John A. T. Robinson (1919–83). Bonhoeffer played an important role in their respective theologies, and they both, albeit in very different ways, brought Bonhoeffer to the fore in academic and popular debate.

## Setting the Scene

As a martyr-figure under Nazism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was highly publicized in the English-speaking world from very soon after his death in 1945. The first English editions of his major writings appeared at regular intervals from 1948 onwards, including the prison letters in 1953 and *Ethics* in 1955. The publication of his works was essential for his reception, but they did not, by themselves, make any immediate or decisive impact upon theology, in Britain at any rate. Here, until the early 1960s, “biblical theology” was the mainstream mode: The primary concern of theologians was to recover and clarify the distinctive themes and concepts of the Bible with the implication that, once so illuminated, their truth would make their own appeal to the contemporary mind, avoiding the crudities of fundamentalist literalism while contributing original insights to current ethical, philosophical, and anthropological understanding. Bonhoeffer did not acquire a role within the assumptions of such theology. A lecture series given in 1961 by the Anglican theologian Alan Richardson, and subsequently published as *The Bible in the Age of Science*,<sup>1</sup> industriously mapped the journey of theology and biblical interpretation from Schleiermacher to the contemporary scene dominated by such as Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Tillich. Bonhoeffer does not so much as feature in the index. This is not to say that Bonhoeffer is absent throughout the theology of the period but that, typically, where he does enter it is usually to illustrate a point being argued for within the perspective of already accepted frameworks. Eberhard Bethge points out that in Germany the arrival of Bonhoeffer’s term “nonreligious Christianity” prompted debate largely on whether its origins lay with Barth or Bultmann.<sup>2</sup> With the argument between these two figures setting the parameters for so much theological discussion, the potential of a quite independent and radically fresh approach from Bonhoeffer for theology as a whole was for a time overlooked. The

1. Alan Richardson, *The Bible in the Age of Science* (London: SCM Press, 1961).

2. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Revised edition, ed. Victoria Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 854.

same was true in Britain, even if here the Barth-Bultmann (like the Barth-Brunner) polemics were somewhat diluted, except perhaps in Scotland. In short, Bonhoeffer was seen as a bit-part player in an already established plot, rather than a character who demanded a whole new drama to be written on his terms. The same applies more broadly within the ecumenical, ecclesiological, and missiological thinking of the time.<sup>3</sup>

That Bonhoeffer, instead of being fitted in to the prevailing narrative, might have his own and radically new perspective on theology as a whole, was a discovery that began to be made at first quietly and then sensationally, in the period 1955–63, and it is here that Ronald Gregor Smith and John A. T. Robinson were decisive. It was Gregor Smith who as publisher, editor, and translator secured the first English editions of most of Bonhoeffer's main writings; who as scholar and teacher was a pioneer in taking Bonhoeffer with academic seriousness; and whose book *The New Man* (1956) was the first British attempt to utilize Bonhoeffer's prison writings in a radically new theological direction. It was Robinson who, while an Anglican bishop, in 1963 rocked the religious scene in Britain, and well beyond, with his book *Honest to God* which made striking use of Bonhoeffer's prison thinking on "religionless Christianity," bringing Bonhoeffer to a level of public prominence from which he has never completely departed. In different ways (their personal connexion was slight, though Robinson acknowledged a debt to Gregor Smith as a pioneer in Bonhoeffer studies), both were crucial in bringing Bonhoeffer to academic and popular attention. This essay will look in turn at each theologian, on their interactions with Bonhoeffer and their roles in mediating his thought, and then attempt some comparison and assessment of their contributions both to Bonhoeffer studies and theology generally.

3. For example, lecturing during 1967–58 the Sinhalese missionary and ecumenist D. T. Niles, in accordance with the then current emphasis upon the mission of the church as the responsibility of the whole people of God, not just the ordained clergy or recognized "preachers," approvingly cites Bonhoeffer's prison letter of 21 July 1944: "it is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God." But the wider implications of Bonhoeffer's critique of "religion" is not dwelt upon. See D. T. Niles, *The Preacher's Calling to be Servant* (London: Lutterworth 1959), 63.

## Ronald Gregor Smith

While still a student at New College, Edinburgh, the Scotsman Ronald Gregor Smith<sup>4</sup> acquired an unusual competence in German, and with the encouragement of his professor, John Bailie, he made the first English translation of Martin Buber's seminal *Ich und Du*<sup>5</sup> in 1937. Not only was the translation impressive, but the youthful Gregor Smith in his introduction wrote with assured confidence on the importance of Buber's insight that God is not only the "wholly other" but the "wholly present" as well. Faith is a *meeting*, encounter with this presence of the Eternal Thou; transcendence is the boundary with this presence of God, not the remoteness of this God from the world. The implications of such an understanding of transcendence were to pursue Gregor Smith all his days together with a Kierkegaardian, existentialist view of faith. From 1939 war brought an interruption to normal academic ambitions, but Gregor Smith pursued his scholarly interests while a parish minister and army chaplain. In 1946 he was appointed education officer at Bonn University under the Allied Control Commission and so was able to return to the continental scene which was very much his intellectual home. In 1947 he became associate editor of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) Press in London, and managing director and editor in 1950. Under him SCM Press grew into the leading British theological publishing house of the time, with continental theology and philosophy of religion featuring heavily on its lists, not least books by or on Buber, Jaspers, Bultmann, Tillich, and Barth. Gregor Smith's own writing on and advocacy of Buber and Kierkegaard continued unabated, joined by J. G. Hamann the eighteenth-century precursor of the romantic and existentialist movements.

SCM Press had already secured the English rights (shared with Macmillan, New York) to Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge*, an abridged translation of which by R. H. Fuller appeared in 1948 as *The Cost of Discipleship* (a complete edition did not appear until 1959). Gregor

4. On Gregor Smith's life and thought as a whole see Keith Clements, *The Theology of Ronald Gregor Smith* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937).

Smith was in close touch with the Christian Kaiser Verlag of Munich, the press responsible for Bonhoeffer's works. He thus received a copy of Bonhoeffer's prison writings *Widerstand und Ergebung*, edited by Eberhard Bethge, immediately on publication in 1951. The effect on Gregor Smith was instant and profound: turning the pages he repeatedly told his German wife Käthe (née Wittlake) that he had found a kindred mind and spirit. This was not surprising given the trajectory of his own thinking from his student days onwards. It was not just that, for example, he had been marked deeply by Buber's "worldly" stress on meeting the eternal Thou in the human Thou, and on the hallowing of the earthly by God. Unpublished papers from the period 1938–43 reveal two overriding concerns: how to combine a Kierkegaardian attachment to the particularity of faith in Christ with embrace of the whole of human life, culture, and responsibility; and how the personalist-existentialist understanding of humanity can be expressed as history.<sup>6</sup> In the unpublished "History Is Personal" (1942) he writes that "sin, forgiveness, salvation, even God are as words, long overdue a holiday"<sup>7</sup>—a sentiment remarkably similar to those of Bonhoeffer in prison two years later—and argues that contemporary society lacks a true sense of history, and more particularly of *personal* history: "that hidden and for the most part anonymous history which is constituted whenever a man faces God with a true sense of his responsibility. This sense of history, seen at its sharpest and clearest in the life of persons, is both the generative and controlling power for all history."<sup>8</sup> His wartime sermons and occasional published pieces, not to mention some of his poetry, also carry an emphasis on the human, suffering Christ as the way God's self is revealed.<sup>9</sup> Above all, his unpublished reflections written in the summer of 1944, soon after becoming an army chaplain, lay bare a severe spiritual and intellectual crisis he had just undergone as to his identity as a Christian and his role as a theologian. He declared the imperative, for himself and the church,

6. Clements, *Theology*, 19–22, 30–32.

7. *Ibid.*, 30.

8. *Ibid.*, 31.

9. *Ibid.*, 35–37.

to disengage from “all the unexamined prejudices, the masquerade of dogmas, the layers of easily-acquired ideas, which lie so easily and stubbornly across the path of the would-be believer,”<sup>10</sup> and the need to face the “shock of Jesus’ life” in its startling freedom and humility. The churches have not understood the humility of God and “all those other magnificent dialectical insights of Jesus which flow from this teaching, about strength in weakness, wisdom in folly, victory by means of the death of the cross, gain through loss, life through death.”<sup>11</sup> It is not only striking but almost uncanny that this was being penned at exactly the same time as Bonhoeffer was writing in very similar terms in Tegel prison.

Gregor Smith immediately secured for SCM Press the English rights to the prison writings, and the first edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*, translated by R. H. Fuller, appeared in 1953.<sup>12</sup> That same year Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s friend, recipient of the prison letters and biographer, with his wife Renate (Bonhoeffer’s niece, née Schleicher) arrived in London as pastor of the German congregation at Sydenham that Bonhoeffer had served twenty years earlier. There quickly grew a warm and life-long relationship, the Gregor Smiths becoming the Bethges’ closest friends in Britain. Meanwhile Gregor Smith impressed on SCM Press the urgency of publishing the rest of Bonhoeffer’s works in English. Thus *Life Together* appeared in 1954, *Ethics and Temptation* in 1955. He could not however persuade his board to take *Sanctorum Communio* and *Act and Being*. It is a measure of how Gregor Smith saw the importance of these earlier works that he translated *Sanctorum Communio* himself and, after leaving SCM Press in 1956, saw to the publication of this and *Act and Being* elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

In 1955 Gregor Smith gave the Alexander Love lectures at Ormond College, Melbourne, and these were published in 1956 as *The New Man: Christianity and Man’s Coming of Age*.<sup>14</sup> The timing was significant: Gregor

10. *Ibid.*, 40.

11. *Ibid.*, 41.

12. The U.S. edition appeared as *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

13. *Sanctorum Communio* (1963) and *Act and Being* (1966) were published by Collins (London) with whom Gregor Smith took on an advisory role.

Smith was leaving SCM Press to be professor of divinity at Glasgow University, and this was his first published full-length attempt at a constructive theology of his own, albeit indebted to several of the thinkers whose work he had been mediating for some time. The subtitle indicates just how significant Bonhoeffer in particular was now proving for him, and if *The New Man* marked a theological coming of age for Gregor Smith himself then Bonhoeffer was the catalyst for it. As has been noted, from his student years Gregor Smith had been impassioned by a vision of how faith, instead of directing people to some quasi-Platonic realm outside time, space, and other people, is to be seen as affirmative of human history, arising out of history and reinvigorating humanity for fresh ventures into the historical enterprise; of history as the place where humanity encounters the divine Spirit, and where God searches for humankind; of transcendence meaning not a remoteness of God but the encounter with the God who is wholly other yet wholly present. This was the intellectual framework of *The New Man* into which Bonhoeffer was now placed and to which he added a new dimension.

The argument of *The New Man* is set in the broadest historical perspective, beginning with the biblical foundation of the God who is met personally in his dealings with his people, through the medieval metaphysical construction and its undermining by the Renaissance, to the contemporary “deadlock” between humanism and a dogmatically defensive, heteronomous Christianity. Buber, Tillich, and Bultmann provide the main theological diagnoses of the spiritual and intellectual malaise which prevents a full recognition of the reality of God and the fullness of truly human existence. In the concluding chapter, “This-Worldly Transcendence,” Bonhoeffer provides the capstone to the whole book. Gregor Smith returns to his diagnosis of the contemporary situation: a deadlock between post-Renaissance humanists who cry one-sidedly for “freedom,” and the heirs of the Reformation who on behalf of traditional religion offer little more than “rearguard actions in defence of untenable positions.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile ordinary people are

14. Ronald Gregor Smith, *The New Man: Christianity and Man's Coming of Age* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

15. *Ibid.*, 94.

either bundled together into some kind of collective or isolated in individualism. “In either case community is hardly known. Even friendship, or love, which are the high points of real community between persons, seems to be increasingly rare.”<sup>16</sup> In this situation the question “What must I do to be saved?” can no longer be answered by “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” because this begs so many questions about who and where Jesus is today. A great deal of work is required: “an existential assessment of the Bible and the world which will uncover the almost entirely dissipated claim of real transcendence as an existent force *within* this world.”<sup>17</sup> It is here that Gregor Smith introduces Bonhoeffer, and it is significant that he does so not first as promulgating any theological concepts or critiques, but as personally embodying what it means to be a Christian in historical responsibility. In these prison fragments, Gregor Smith states, “you see a fine, cultured, sensitive mind, heir of all the wealth of Europe, rejoicing in its treasures, but at the same time intensely concerned with the problem of the right way through for modern man to his proper life as the heir of Christianity.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, when Gregor Smith starts to let Bonhoeffer speak for himself it is the very concrete proposals for a new form of the church in the “Outline for a Book” that he cites: “the Church is her true self only when she exists for others.”<sup>19</sup> This, says Gregor Smith, is not just another exhortation to good works but arises out of his understanding that the transcendent is to be met in this world, above all in the solicitude for others given to us in the life and way of Jesus. “This has also an important negative implication, namely, that God is not to be met primarily in some assertion about him. . . God is not the idea we have of him. He is not any idea. To attempt to elevate some idea to the place of God is to make an idol and worship that instead of God.”<sup>20</sup> The mystery of God is not an as yet-unknowable mystery “but a *present* mystery”;<sup>21</sup> then, having cited at

16. *Ibid.*, 95.

17. *Ibid.*, 96.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Gregor Smith of course quotes from the first English edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*. For the new translation, see DBWE 8, 503.

20. Gregor Smith, *New Man*, 98.

length Bonhoeffer's letter of 30 April 1944 rejecting the *deus ex machina* God of "religious people,"<sup>22</sup> comes a reiteration of transcendence as an encounter in the world, but *this* time in Bonhoeffer's words about participation in the being of Jesus in his new life for others.<sup>23</sup> It is only then that Gregor Smith reverts to the 30 April letter in which Bonhoeffer attacks the "religious premise" and asks about the expression of faith in a "religionless world." Gregor Smith does not press too hard for meaning here, recognizing that Bonhoeffer is simply asking questions and only giving partial answers. Nevertheless, he suggests, Bonhoeffer is "breaking through to a fresh apprehension of the status of man and the world as something existing in their own right as the place where God loves to be."<sup>24</sup> This in turn leads him to affirm the significance for Bonhoeffer of the "secret discipline," and that "fastidious" element in the Christian tradition which in tension with "worldliness" maintains a "powerful dialectic" in Bonhoeffer's thought, of being existentially both for the world and against it.

Despite the book's subtitle Gregor Smith, remarkably, hardly refers at all to Bonhoeffer's descriptions of the "coming of age of mankind." What he does have is his own lifelong apprehension of the calling of humans, in relationship with others, to historical responsibility which means the discernment of opportunities of grace within the given context. That for him is the heart of human maturity. Adapting Feuerbach's argument (and disputing that it is inherently atheistic) about an "historical existence of God," Gregor Smith claims: "A faith which takes us not out of this world, into a sphere of arbitrary interventions, but deeper into the world in its historicity, is, it seems to me, the very crux of our belief in the Incarnation."<sup>25</sup> God is met "at the luminous point of human existence, where the individual faces him in utter openness, receives forgiveness, and is made free"<sup>26</sup>—always "in the facing of other people in the emergent community with them." Out

21. *Ibid.*, 99.

22. Cf. DBWE 6, 362–65.

23. In "Outline for a Book," DBWE 6, 501.

24. Gregor Smith, *New Man*, 103.

25. *Ibid.*, 110.

26. *Ibid.*, 111.

of the living encounter with God, in freedom, “the one truly live point in the whole story of mankind” new and surprising history is made. And the words with which Gregor Smith concludes *The New Man* could well have been his description of Bonhoeffer in his life and death, as he speaks of,

The point where a man, the full depth of his humanity, with the whole burden of his memories which we call culture and the whole burden of his failures and sin, takes to himself, in his whole life, the words of forgiveness and the invitation to faith which are the palimpsest of all the pages of history.<sup>27</sup>

Gregor Smith had thus found in Bonhoeffer one who both embodied such historical faith and gave him the theological language to express the reality of the “this-worldly transcendence” which he had pursued for so long—and gave it all a christological grounding in the being of Jesus.

What Gregor Smith called “this-worldly transcendence” focused for him Bonhoeffer’s chief significance, and this remained core to his exposition of Bonhoeffer for the twelve remaining years of his life. In turn *The New Man* encouraged others to see Bonhoeffer as not just a martyr figure to be quoted reverentially but a theologian to be brought into serious contemporary dialogue; and the prison writings as more than just striking if enigmatic utterances but as offering clues to the central theological question of how to speak of God in a world increasingly dominated by humanist assumptions. The book was probably appreciated most by those pioneering new forms of ministry and mission in society, for example in industrial mission and in higher education (in which the SCM itself of course was deeply involved).<sup>28</sup> More widely it gave impetus to the growing concern, especially in ecumenical circles, for a “theology of the secular.” A landmark event in this movement was the 1958 study conference on “The Meaning of the Secular” at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland, at

27. *Ibid.*, 112.

28. Cf. Clements, *Theology*, 68f.

which Gregor Smith gave his paper “A Theological Perspective of the Secular”<sup>29</sup> which draws significantly on Bonhoeffer.

Gregor Smith’s advocacy of Bonhoeffer (as of Bultmann) continued during his Glasgow years, in his professorial lectures and elsewhere. He spoke about Bonhoeffer “not because I want to but because I must,”<sup>30</sup> yet also several times warned against “a cult of Bonhoeffer” forming especially among students. With Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann (one of Bonhoeffer’s students) he edited *Begegnungen mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ein Almanack* (1964) a collection of reminiscences of Bonhoeffer by his relatives, students, and colleagues, which appeared in English in 1966, translated by Käthe Gregor Smith as *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.<sup>31</sup> More substantially he edited the symposium *World Come of Age*<sup>32</sup> that included, in addition to his own introduction, essays by Eberhard Bethge, Karl Barth, Regin Prenter, William Hamilton, and Rudolf Bultmann. It was under his supervision at Glasgow that his doctoral student J. A. Philips wrote the first major study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology, *The Form of Christ in the World*.<sup>33</sup> Had he lived longer, it is highly likely that he would have devoted more time to Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* with its central theme of “the unity of God and the world in Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

During his years as professor at Glasgow until his untimely death in 1968, Gregor Smith was part of the “secular theology” movement of the 1960s yet stood distinctively apart from much of it, whether Paul van Buren’s *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*<sup>35</sup> or the “death of God” theology of such as William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer. Such thinkers, he maintained, had as well as cutting themselves off from

29. Published posthumously as chapter 2 “Man in his Wholeness” in Gregor Smith’s collection of essays *The Free Man* (London: Collins 1969). The book also reproduces chapters 3, 4, and 5 of *The New Man*.

30. In an unpublished lecture “Dietrich Bonhoeffer” given in USA 1964. See Clements, *Theology*, 77.

31. (London: Collins, 1966; New York: Harper, 1966). Käthe Gregor Smith also was a member of the team that translated the first English edition of Eberhard Bethge’s biography of Bonhoeffer (London: Collins 1970).

32. (London: Collins, 1967; New York: Harper, 1967).

33. (London: Collins 1967).

34. Cf. Gregor Smith, “Bonhoeffer,” in *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie (London: SCM Press, 1965), 33f.

35. (London: SCM Press 1963).

the inner essentials of the tradition, lost sight of any notion of transcendence, which is the real source of freedom given to human existence in faith. He argued for a distinction between “secularization” (as an unarguable historical phenomenon of Western society), “secularism” (as a reductionist ideology imposed on human affairs), and *secularity*, that stance of consciously chosen, free responsibility for others and the future. This secularity, maintained Gregor Smith, is a product of the gospel and is the meaning of the life of Jesus who, right to the cry of dereliction from the cross, disclosed the true nature of secularity. This was the burden of Gregor Smith’s most substantial work, *Secular Christianity* (1966).<sup>36</sup> Crucial to his argument was his tenacious hold of the tension in Bonhoeffer’s striking paradox, that “Before God, and with God, we live without God,”<sup>37</sup> and right to his last, unfinished work, *The Doctrine of God*, Gregor Smith refused to allow Bonhoeffer to be interpreted in a wholly immanentist way.<sup>38</sup>

### John Robinson

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was launched into unprecedented publicity throughout and beyond the English-speaking world by association with *Honest to God*, a relatively short (143-page) paperback by John A. T. Robinson,<sup>39</sup> then bishop of Woolwich, published by SCM Press on 19 March 1963. The book created a sensation, in part triggered by a front-page article from Robinson in the *Observer* Sunday newspaper two days previously under the banner headline “our image of god must go.” That headline was not of Robinson’s own choosing, but was certainly in tune with much of what followed: “If Christianity is to survive it must be relevant to modern secular man, not just to the dwindling number of the religious . . . Men can no longer credit the existence of ‘gods’ or of God as a supernatural Person, such as religion has always

36. (London: Collins 1966).

37. DBWE 6, 479.

38. R. Gregor Smith, *The Doctrine of God* (London: Collins, 1970), 176f.

39. On Robinson, see Eric James, *A Life of Bishop John A. T. Robinson. Scholar, Pastor, Prophet* (London: Collins, 1987); and Alistair Kee, *The Roots of Christian Freedom: The Theology of John A. T. Robinson* (London: SPCK, 1988).