

Bonhoeffer's Letter to Gandhi: Introduction and Commentary

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Revered Mahatmaji!

It is on account of the most distressing situation in the European countries and my own country, in Germany, that I dare to approach you personally and I hope you will forgive my doing so. I have been waiting for a long time, but now things have advanced so far, that I do not think it justifiable to wait any longer. I know, you have an open ear for every need wherever it be and I trust you will not refuse to give your help and advice to me although you do not know me, and you will forgive my questions.

The great need of Europe and of Germany in particular is not the economic and political confusion, but it is a deep spiritual need. Europe and Germany are suffering from a dangerous fever and are losing both self-control and the consciousness of what they are doing. The healing power for all human distress and need, namely Christ's message, is disappointing more and more thinking people on account of the present organization. There are of course here and there Christian individuals who are doing their utmost to move organized Christianity toward a fundamental regeneration, but most of the organized bodies of the Christian Churches would not recognize the real issue. Being myself a Christian pastor I find this experience most distressing and depressing. I have no doubt that only true Christianity can help our Western peoples to a new and spiritually sound life. But Christianity must be something very different from what it has become in these days.

It is no use to foretell the future which is in God's hands, but if not all signs deceive us, everything seems to work for war in the near future, and the next war will certainly bring the spiritual death of Europe. What we need therefore in our countries is a truly spiritual living Christian peace movement. Western Christianity must be reborn on the Sermon on the Mount and here is the crucial point why I am writing to you. From all I know about you and your work after having studied your books and your movement for a few years, I feel we Western Christians should try to learn from you what realization of faith means, what a life devoted to political and racial peace can attain. If there is anywhere a visible outline towards such attainments, then I see it in your movement. I know, of course, you are not a baptized Christian, but the people whose faith Jesus praised mostly did not belong to the official Church at that time either. We are having great theologians in Germany - the greatest of them being in my opinion Karl Barth, whose disciple and friend I am happy to be - they are teaching us the great theological thoughts of the Reformation anew, but there is no one to show us the way towards a

new Christian life in uncompromising accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. It is in this respect that I am looking up to you for help.

It is the great admiration which I am cherishing for your country. Its philosophy and its leaders. for your personal work among the poorest of your fellowmen, for your educational ideals for your stand for peace and non-violence, for truth and its force, which has convinced me that I definitely should come to India next winter (together with a friend who is moved by the same ideas and questions - he is a physicist and engineer I have been travelling and living with all over Europe. I went to the USA to find what I was looking for -- but I did not find it. I do not want to accuse myself of having missed the one great occasion in my life to learn the meaning of Christian life of real community life, of truth and love in reality. The question which I beg to put before you, is, whether I would be allowed to stay with you in your ashram for a while to study your movement. I do not believe in short interviews, I do think one should live with one another to know each other. I have saved enough money now to pay my voyage, but I should be bound to live on very low expenses in India. Do you think this will be possible? Could one possibly find a family which belongs to your movement with which I could stay and did any sort of tutorial work with the children in compensation? Of course, this is a question of minor importance in comparison with my great desire to know your movement, for which purpose I should be willing to bring any sacrifice whatever

I am 28 years old, German, lecturer of Theology in Berlin University, at present Pastor of two German congregations in London, I happen to be international youth secretary of the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches, I have been working in the ecumenic movements for a few years and have many good friendships. I have written a few books on the Christian doctrine of the Church of Creation and Sin, and I beg to send you under separate cover a very short theological article in English, written in the U.S.A. three years ago.

Now I do not want to trouble you any longer with myself. I am waiting eagerly for an answer from you. Enclosed find a letter of Mr. C.F. Andrews, I have also asked the Bishop of Chichester, Dr. Bell, to write a few words about me to you.

I wish to apologize once more for approaching you personally

I remain, revered Mahatmaji.

very respectfully

yours in the Fellowship

[signed] Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Herbert Jele

**Concerning the Christian Idea of God." WE 10 61-461 Originally written for the first semester course at Union Theological Seminary with Eugene Lyman in 1930, Bonhoeffer probably set out an offprint of the version published in the JOURNAL OF RELIGION 12 (1932).177-185. Whether this was read by Ghandi or survives in the archives has not yet been determined.