

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of self-murder

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In the section of his *Ethics* on 'Natural Life', Bonhoeffer titles the section on 'suicide'<sup>1</sup> with the German word 'Self-murder' (*Selbstmord*)<sup>2</sup>. There are two other German words that he could have used (*Freitod* or *Suizid*), but Bonhoeffer chooses the stronger of the three. Bonhoeffer sees self-murder as primarily a matter of faith (or lack thereof). The editor of the English edition of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, Clifford Green, notes that 'Bonhoeffer's ethics never rested on principles'<sup>3</sup> but rather on the image of God as one of relationship: *imago relationis*. 'A relationship in which a person is free for the other [is one that] reflects, or images, the freedom of God for humanity in Jesus Christ'.<sup>4</sup> So self-murder is not to be taken lightly, in the sense that it is the destruction of both the image of God and relationship with God.

Despite having written about 'voluntary assisted dying' eighty years ago, Bonhoeffer still has three significant theological insights to add to the current discussion.

The first is that Bonhoeffer sees the possibility of self-murder as a freedom that is uniquely held and used by human beings. Humans have the freedom to see their bodily life as a 'gift to preserve and as a sacrifice to offer'.<sup>5</sup> But he qualifies the purpose of the sacrifice by writing: 'Human beings have freedom toward death and the right to death, in the sense of sacrifice, but only when the good sought through sacrifice, and not the destruction of one's own life, is the reason for taking one's life.'<sup>6</sup> 'It is not a person's bodily life itself that has an ultimate right. Instead, the human being is free with respect to bodily life, and "life is not the highest of goods".' (quoting from Friedrich von Schiller's 1803 tragedy *The Bride of Messina*)<sup>7</sup>

His second insight is to address the question of self-murder with grace, rather than the law. He wisely notes how pointless it is to try and command or outlaw self-murder (either by the regulations of human community or by the fear of dying unrepentantly without forgiveness). Bonhoeffer writes:

Those who stand on the verge of self-murder no longer hear a prohibition or command; they can hear only the gracious call of God to faith, to salvation, and to turning back. The despairing cannot be saved by any law appealing to their own strength; this only drives them into more helpless despair. Those who despair of life are helped only by the saving act of another, the offer of a new life that is not lived by their own strength

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 196–203.

2 *Ibid.*, 196.

3 *Ibid.*, 16.

4 *Ibid.*, 4.

5 *Ibid.*, 197.

6 *Ibid.*, 197.

7 *Ibid.*, 199, n. 98.

but by the grace of God....only by a new spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer then gives some examples of people who are on the edge of despair such as those who are tired of life; or those for whom life is a torment. He encourages these Christians to place their lives in the hands of God who gave them that life in the first place. The hands of God include our hands, as instruments of Christ called to be 'there for others'.

His third insight is that we cannot understand fully or critically evaluate the complex decision that might be made by the person considering self-murder. Bonhoeffer is well aware that one cannot judge the person who is considering self-murder by only focussing on the 'guidelines' with which to approach these situations of extremity. We may overlook the complexity of each person's situation. Every person's interior reflection and motives for making these critical decisions are often very complex. 'Because the boundary between the freedom to sacrifice one's life and the misuse of this freedom for self-murder can often barely be perceived by the human eye, there is no basis for judging the single deed [of self-murder].<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer further clarifies that 'self-inflicted death becomes self-murder only when a person acts exclusively and consciously out of personal self-interest'.<sup>10</sup>

Bonhoeffer makes clear what he considers to be wrong or selfish reasons for selfmurder. They are when:

personal troubles such as wounded honour, erotic passion, financial ruin, gambling debts, or serious personal transgressions lead to suicide—that is, when self-inflicted death is not to protect another life but is intended only to justify one's own. In concrete cases of this sort, to be sure, the thought of sacrifice will not be completely absent. Still, here the rescue of one's own person will outweigh all other motives, and so unbelief is the ultimate reason for the deed. In such a case, one does not have faith that God can give even a failed life meaning and make it right again, in fact that a life may come to its real fulfillment precisely through failure.<sup>11</sup>

These selfish reasons primarily relate to people who do not believe in the existence of God. The belief that there is no God means that the person who is an atheist or humanist becomes the lord of their own earthly fate or their own 'god'. Therefore, the humanist considers that the person who is brave enough to take their own life by self-murder should be admired. Bonhoeffer interprets the attempts at controlling one's life and death as being 'often met with the applause and justification of noble people'.<sup>12</sup> Some examples given are loss of honour, work or a dearest loved one. Bonhoeffer sums up the rationale of these despairing responses by suggesting that 'Self-murder is a human effort to confer ultimate human meaning on a life that, in human terms, has become meaningless'.<sup>13</sup> This eerie and lonely deed can only affirm life by destroying it. This is the manner by which the

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8 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200.

9 *Ibid.*, 200.

10 *Ibid.*, 200.

11 *Ibid.*, 202.

12 *Ibid.*, 197.

13 *Ibid.*, 198.

unbelieving humanist or atheist tries to justify their existence and maintain control in the face of there being no God.

Bonhoeffer then outlines several scenarios in which selfmurder could be considered a selfless act. The first one is that of a prisoner in war who may take their life so that they will not betray their people while undergoing torture. Another is the situation of a political statesman who may believe that if they die, the people will have a greater chance of survival. In a more obvious way, it is almost self-evident to leave the last place to another person in a lifeboat of a sinking ship, or to step into the line of fire of a bullet in order to protect another person. In a more complex way, Bonhoeffer's personal decision to become part of the plot to murder Hitler was a type of self-murder, for he knew that he could be accused of treason and thereby put his life at risk of being terminated by the government authorities (which eventually happened).

Bonhoeffer considers another example which comes closer to our modern dilemma of voluntary assisted dying. Bonhoeffer gives the example of when an 'incurably ill person cannot help but see that continued care would result in the material and emotional breakdown of the family and there decides and acts to liberate them from this burden'.<sup>14</sup> In this example, Bonhoeffer does not explore it more deeply to see why the person feels this way. Nor does he consider how the family might prevent this person's self-murder occurring, in what may be a genuinely intentional selfless act on the part of the self-murderer to spare the family. It also needs to be kept in mind that Bonhoeffer wrote at a time when many of the currently available medical and palliative innovations were not known or widely available.

Bonhoeffer concludes his brief section on self-murder with the pastoral advice to the Christian who is burdened by not having a perfect life in this world or with the thoughts that the world is too burdensome or meaningless. He counsels the following: 'In such a situation no human or divine law can prevent the deed; only the comfort of God's grace and the power of Christians' prayers can help in such temptation.'<sup>15</sup>

Prayerfully, we lie prostrate at the foot of the cross of Jesus, in worship, submission, awe and an overwhelming sense of the love of God. May we pray with, and alongside those we know and love who are facing their own death, as well as the burdens they carry before their death. Do we see complex motives of self-murder in Jesus' own death or the purest motive of unbridled love for every human being? What does it mean that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16)? Could Jesus' death be seen also as part of God's excruciating identification with our broken, self-murdering selves? Even though Jesus is the 'author of life' (Acts 3:15), to what extent did Jesus take on himself all of what it means to be human, including this freedom to selfmurder? I pray that our discussion of voluntary assisted dying will not just be an ethical discussion, but an existential and relational discussion about who we are and who God is for us in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 201.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 202–203.