

GOD THE INTIMATE INTERVENTIONIST:

A Dialogue between Nick Cave and Dietrich Bonhoeffer



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Nick Cave, the great Australian gothic rock artist, writes songs that are God-bothering and bothered. But his most popular song is best-known for its negative line ‘I don’t believe in an interventionist God’ – along with REM’s ‘Losing my Religion’, the anthem for many a New Atheist. Many Christians, ever-defensive and alert against the New Atheists mistakenly quote Cave in this way. Tragically, our tone-deafness highlights the way we are so often distracted by the angry New Atheists from addressing the anguished longing of those whom Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Belknap, 2007 Ch. 16) describes as ‘cross-pressured’ – unbelievers aware that the rumour of God kept alive by billions can’t be easily dismissed and believers aware that there are many unbelievers with good reason for being so, finding echoes in the chambers of their own hearts on dark and silent nights. Cave, a god-wrestler if ever there was one, goes on to sing of his lover, ‘but darlin’ I know you do’ and then prayerfully hymn God in the wonderful refrain ‘into my arms O Lord, into my arms’. To understand what

Cave means by this impassioned cry to the *Intimate Interventionist* we need to set this song about his muse in the context of the long journey of Cave’s God-haunted musical musings. We also need to bring him into dialogue with the great theological critic of false interventions of ‘faith’, as cover-ups for our failures, a false religiousness, and abstract transcendence – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his prison cell in Tegel, Berlin (a place formative for Cave’s own music), anxiously awaiting a possible reunion with his young fiancée.

Australian literary scholars Peter Conrad and Lyn McCredden have recently written about Cave’s gruesome Gothic spirituality, grappling with the paradoxical absence and presence of God. In ‘The Good Son’, (*The Monthly*, August 2009, 28-37) Conrad writes as one who doesn’t ‘expect to see the face of God’ (37) and sees religion as ‘a metaphysical exercise in killing, since God created the world only to have the pleasure of slowly destroying it’ (28). Drawing on Cave’s music, art works, writings and films, he couches Cave in a neo-Freudian psychological perspective. Cave ‘often impersonates a pinioned Christ, writhing

in excruciation’ (30), seeking absolution from his late father, an English teacher who endowed Cave with his love of literature and Scripture. His father’s 1978 death in a car crash was conveyed to Cave and his mother at St. Kilda police station where Cave’s mother was literally bailing him out from a charge of drunken vandalism. In a sense he’s always been on bail, never acquitted from the ‘abject horror’ of this pivotal episode. This plays itself out in the vivid violence of Cave’s lyrics and images. For Conrad ‘Cave has spent three decades begging pardon for an Oedipal crime he didn’t actually commit, while punishing the world for its random injustice by fancifully killing off everyone who isn’t his irreplaceable father’ (35).

But there is a more positive side of what Conrad sees as Cave’s primal patriarchal projection onto ‘God’. Speaking on love songs Cave states: ‘The loss of my father created in my life a vacuum, a space in which my words began to float and collect and find their purpose’ (31), art setting its face against Ecclesiastes’ ‘vanity of vanities’. The sin and sorrow of life ‘under the sun’ that Cave’s similar capacity for melancholy takes so seriously, is epitomised in his felt complicity

in his father's death.

Such a psychological interpretation is readily understandable and its pivotal place in his pilgrimage both toward and away from God provokes an insightful but ultimately reductionist reading of Cave by Conrad. For him, Cave is aptly named, prophetically preferring the gloom and darkness of caves while awaiting 'the darkness that will descend on us all', to the preferred Australian narrative of prophets coming from the desert and 'Australia, where the sun shines', which Cave abhors in his 1999 lecture on love songs. Conrad sums up:

Cave's grudges and rages and festering vendettas made him an artist, and his despair and hatred made him a believer; at this late hour he is exactly the kind of franking conscience the world needs. Although I don't ever expect to see the face of God, I imagine that if he did exist, he might have a face like Cave's – scarily sombre, with an adamant gaze and a mouth that twitches to hint at a sense of humour as black as his hair' (37).

Conrad's tragic tale finally finds hints of hope in Cave's black undertaker humour. (Cave often dressed like one.)

However, while taking Cave's dark side as seriously as Conrad, I will argue, drawing on McCredde and Bonhoeffer, that there is more hope available here. Conrad's preference for cave imagery to my mind provides a Platonic view of Cave, where spiritual reality is preferenced over the physical shadows dancing on the walls of the cave, in Plato's famous allegory. In fact, it is this very dichotomy, dominating neo-platonic western Christianity since Augustine, which gives us the isolated, interfering, 'interventionist God', the absentee landlord that Cave and many of his contemporaries disbelieve. McCredde provides us with a more integrated reading of Cave which is not only tragic and cruciform, but comedic, incarnational and resurrectional in its view of embodied love. Ironically, Conrad quotes Cave's 'Wild World', but misses its resurrectional implications: 'Hold me up, baby', Cave begs. 'Our bodies melt together (we are one)/Post crucifixion, baby' (30).

McCredde's 'The Carnal Theologies of Nick Cave' (in her *Luminous Moments*, ATF, 2010), rightly questions the way 20th century anthropologists and religious historians, like Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, opposed the two domains. By contrast, 'Cave's sacred is deeply enmeshed in the human dimensions of flesh, erotics, and

violence' (105). Cave critiques the bloodless Christianity of much of the church, but craves tangible communion with God. In 'Brompton Oratory' (on *The Boatman's Call* album), he longs for the recognition of the resurrected Christ as he 'returns to his loved ones' in the reading from Luke 24, but is not unfeeling like the stone apostles looking down, longing for 'a beauty impossible... the blood imparted in little sips/the smell of you still on my hands/as I bring the cup up to my lips'. This incarnational intimacy and rejection of an impassive, externally interventionist God is captured in the last verse 'No God up in the sky,/No devil beneath the sea, /Could do the job that you did, baby/ of bringing me to my knees'. Here, human and divine desire mingle, in body and blood, in what for many might seem blasphemous, but then so they said of the Incarnation.

It was the great Christian poet Francis Thompson who sadly said 'I cannot see the Glory, for the colour of her hair'. But Cave is a better, more biblical poet in seeing the glory in the colour of her hair or her smell on his hands. There is good precedent for this: the medieval English wedding service (and the Sydney Anglican service) has a vow where the man promises 'I worship you with my body'. And the wife earthly promises 'to be buxom in bed and in board'! I once wrote a poem to my wife after the birth of our third child where I knelt and worshipped her with my body.

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This brings us to the magnificent 'Into my Arms', from *The Boatman's Call* again. The album title recalls Charon, the mythical boatman of the final watery journey to the underworld. It provides the dark background that lets the love song shine brighter. The famous first line 'I don't believe in an interventionist God' has made many Christians tone-deaf to its deeper longings. They miss its 'Lord I believe help my unbelief' tension – beautifully capturing the cross-pressured nature of contemporary secularity. But Cave goes on: 'But if I did I would kneel down and ask Him/ Not to intervene when it came to you/ Not to touch a hair on your head/ To leave you as you are/ And if He felt He had to direct you/ Then direct you into my arms'. This humorous 'doubter's dialogue' with Cave's believing better half turns serious with the prayerful plea to light her journey back, to constantly return her 'into my arms,

O Lord' so they may 'walk like Christ, in grace and love'. Underneath his arms, the lover trusts, 'are the everlasting arms' (Deut 33:27) (McCredde, 111). This is indeed an intimate interventionist.

A less ambiguous conviction of, and desire for, a tangible, palpable presence comes through even more clearly in 'There is a Kingdom' from the same album: 'There is a kingdom./ There is a king./ And he lives without/ And he lives within/ And he is everything' with its 'thoroughgoing kind of incarnationalism' (112). Later in 'Gates of the Garden', on the 2001 album *No More Shall We Meet* we see that Cave feels echoes of Eden in the living, breathing vitality of erotic engagement 'As we open up the gates of the garden'. And like the intimacy of 'Into My Arms', 'God is in this hand that I hold' (121). We should beware though, lest we lose sight of the tightrope Cave walks, of the tensions within his texts, or try to make them too theologically precise rather than erotically evocative. As McCredde sums up so well, 'redemption is imagined by Cave, but rarely without the accompanying shadows of uncertainty' (124) and violence, as in his script and musical score of the 2005 film of Australian frontier violence, *The Proposition* (114).

Yet the immediacy of the intervention of God's Kingdom is captured well in Cave's riveting introduction to Mark's Gospel in the Canongate series of biblical books. Cave gets Mark's sense of immediacy, often conveyed

by Mark's regular repetition of the Greek *euthus* – usually translated 'immediately', which gives the rapid-fire sense of the urgency of the Kingdom's coming, just around the bend. But Cave stops short of the ultimate intervention of the Resurrection, albeit Mark's is the most ambiguous and mysterious version of the empty tomb, met by the fear of the women finding it. Cave may not be, yet, a Christian, but his captivation with Christ shows he is not far from the Kingdom. Perhaps a dialogue with a kindred spirit like Bonhoeffer might close any gap.

Bonhoeffer's Intimate Interventionist

The normally sophisticated English comedian, Eddie Izzard, provides a segue to Bonhoeffer's nuanced notion of divine 'intervention'. Izzard activates the stereotype

of the interventionist God in the context of Nazi Germany. In his recent live DVD, 'Stripped', he raises the post-Holocaust question of Emerson, Lake and Palmer as to 'Why did He [God] lose six million Jews?' Izzard says: 'Hitler was saying "I will kill them all, burn them in the ovens". That's enough of a hint to knock his head off; time for a bit of divine intervention don't you think?'

But Bonhoeffer, in his intimate letters to his best friend and confessor, Eberhard Bethge, was never one to rely on the *Deus ex machina* or God of the gaps, the machine that the Greek dramatists would turn on or off when they needed a neat resolution to the ragged, torn tragedies of history. Bonhoeffer resisted such easy resolutions, resolutely holding to his and others' human responsibility to act, with enormous risk, against the human tyrannies the term 'tragedy' tends to fatalistically hide. God is a God of the centre, not of the borders or the gaps (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, Fontana, London, 1953, 93, 122).

This is why Bonhoeffer wrote out of his sense of separation to his friend facing separation: 'In the first place nothing can fill the gap when we are away from those we love, and it would be wrong to try and find anything. We must simply hold out and win through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, since leaving the gap unfilled preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap: he does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain (Christmas Eve, 1943, *Letters*, 1953, 61).

Bonhoeffer wrote soon after describing his determination to see life not from his privileged position nor from that of a metaphysically detached and transcendent God who could be treated as a tool to reinforce our view 'from above'.

There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short from the perspective of those who suffer... This perspective from below must not become the particular possession of those who are eternally dissatisfied; rather, we must do justice to life in all its dimensions from a higher satisfaction, whose foundation is beyond any talk of, 'from below' or 'from above.' This is the way in which we may affirm it ('After Ten Years', New Year

1943, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, McMillan, New York, 1971, 17).

This transcendence is not a religious form of cheap and quick compensation for the weak and 'eternally dissatisfied' whose manipulative slave morality Nietzsche despised; it is neither classical, dualistic metaphysics nor pietistic inwardness and individualism (April 30, 1944, *Letters*, 1953, 92); 'it is at once both a worldly and a spiritual transcendence' fit for humans in their strength and 'coming of age'.

On 21 July 1944, the day after the failed plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote in a way that connects to Cave's metaphor, of 'throwing oneself completely into the arms of God' identifying with 'the suffering of God in the world ... awake with Christ in Gethsemane' (*Letters*, 1953, 125). We are called to be on the side of suffering humanity, as Jesus 'the man for others' was, in a form of this-worldly transcendence or intimate intervention.

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In Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and *Letters* this earthly transcendence or 'religionless Christianity' involves the more subtle intervention of an improvisational ethics of radical responsibility. It is found in following the 'man for others' in the otherly, awe-inspiring, aesthetic transcendence of this-worldly encounter with human faces and earthly realities. This aesthetic awakening opened Bonhoeffer to a polyphonic and multi-dimensional faith. Bonhoeffer celebrated its multiplicity in a letter to a distressed Bethge on 20 May 1944.

There is always a danger of intense love destroying what I might call the 'polyphony' of life. What I mean is that God requires that we should love him eternally with our whole hearts, yet not so as to compromise or diminish our earthly affections, but as a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide a counterpoint. Earthly affection is one of these contrapuntal themes, a theme which enjoys an autonomy of its own. Even the Bible can find room for the Song of Songs, and one could hardly have a more passionate and sensual love than is there portrayed ... it is a good thing that that book is included in the Bible

as a protest against those who believe that the Bible stands for the restraint of passion (is there any example of such restraint anywhere in the Old Testament? [which perhaps explains the Old Testament's deep attraction to Cave and Bonhoeffer]). Where the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint from being developed to the utmost of its limits. Both ground bass and counterpoint are 'without confusion and yet distinct', in the words of the Chalcedon formula, like Christ in his divine and human natures. Perhaps the importance of polyphony in music lies in the fact that it is a musical reflection of this Christological truth, and ... therefore an essential element in the Christian life. All this occurred to me after you were here. Can you see what I'm driving at? I wanted to tell you that we must have a good, clear *cantus firmus*. Without it there can be no full or perfect sound, but with it the

counterpoint has a firm support and cannot get out of tune or fade out, yet is always a perfect or distinct whole in its own right. ... Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness, and at the same time assure us that nothing [calamitous] can go wrong so long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going... Perhaps your leave and the separation which lies ahead will be easier for you to bear. Please do not fear or hate separation [from wife Renate and child and his namesake friend Dietrich]; a good deal will be easier to bear in these days together, and possibly also in the days ahead when you are separated. Please, [Eberhard], do not fear and hate the separation, if it should come again, with all its attendant perils, but rely on the *cantus firmus*." (*Letters*, 1953, 99-100 with insertions from third English edition, 1971, 302-3)

This is no abstract theology but one worked out in the war-time crucible of Bethge's feared separation from his wife and new child, Bonhoeffer's own hard-felt separation from his young bride-to-be Maria, and his longing for his best friend. The next day, May 21st he wrote: 'The subject of polyphony is still pursuing me.

I was thinking to-day how painful it is without you, and it occurred to me how pain and joy are also part of the polyphony of life, and that they can exist independently side by side' (101).

Here Bonhoeffer develops an aesthetic, incarnational theology of persons and love, based on the classical musical principle of the *cantus firmus* that he knew well as a concert level pianist. 'A *cantus firmus* is a melody to which one or more contrapuntal parts can be added – parts that are truly distinct, novel and even seemingly at odds with other parts until they are bound to this consistent yet fluid melody that is the *cantus firmus*' (<http://www.jeffkeuss.com/blog/?p=1223>). Bonhoeffer extends the musical analogy to Christ's two natures, divine and human, which join, without fusing or destroying, divine and human love. The intimacy of the Incarnation links divine and human life and love, through the membrane of Christ's manhood or humanity. To link this with Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, it means that the penultimate or natural sphere of human loves is not annihilated by the ultimate, divine love, but nature is preserved and perfected by grace, not through a more distant divinity, or generic 'God-ness', but in the particular person of Jesus Christ, the very definition of the natural, of life and love (see David Griffin's forthcoming ACT ThD thesis 'The Word Became Flesh. The Rapprochement of Natural Law and Radical Christian Ethics').

Jeremy Begbie's book *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 156-162 gets Bonhoeffer's gist. Bonhoeffer, he says, 'envisages a polyphonous kind of life for the church in the world, a rich life shot through with joy... It is a life of "worldliness" – not the worldliness of the secularist, denying God, nor the worldliness of a certain kind of aesthete, fleeing responsibility, but a fully down-to-earth kind of Christian life that can include free, "aesthetic existence" (friendship, art, etc.) while also being ethically alert and responsible'.

Bonhoeffer thus takes the good and beautiful as seriously as the true in Plato's great trilogy. By his aesthetic turn and musical terms he is able to break through the poverty of much religious 'interventionist' language in a way that respects the relative autonomy of the created realm and relationships. God is not only expressed in modernistic style factual propositions, (as former Moore College Principal Broughton Knox's 'Propositional Revelation the Only Revelation' claimed), but God also propositions and woos us.

The musical turn as fellow classical pianist-theologian Begbie recognises, gets us beyond the literal dis-placement of God in modernity, with its dominant use of spatial analogies, as if the square peg of abstract divinity cannot fit in the round hole of humanity. At his 2010 New College University of NSW lectures he would play a note, and then another, each distinct, but harmonious. The two notes or entities do not engulf each other – as in the modern view of opposing generic divinity and humanity – but in their conjoined concreteness and particularity in the incarnation, co-exist, bringing the best out in each other. As Bonhoeffer's theological mentor Barth once said, God doesn't have to make humanity small to make himself big.

Bonhoeffer is perhaps literally closest to Nick Cave's 'Into My Arms' when he writes on December 18, 1943 that

to long for the transcendent when you are in your wife's arms is, to put it mildly, a lack of taste, and it is certainly not what God expects of us. We ought to find God and love him in the blessings he sends us. If he pleases to grant us

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some overwhelming earthly bliss, we ought not to try and be more religious than God himself... Once a man has found God in his earthly bliss and has thanked him for it, there will be plenty of opportunities to remind himself that these earthly pleasures are only transitory, and that it is good to accustom himself to the idea of eternity... But everything in its season, and the important thing is to keep in step with God, and not to get a step or two in front of him (nor for that matter, a step or two behind him either). It is arrogant to want to have everything at once – matrimonial bliss, and the cross, and the heavenly Jerusalem, where there is no longer marriage, nor giving in marriage. 'To everything there is a season' (Ecclesiastes 3). Everything has its time ... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing ... and God seeketh again that which is passed away.

Bonhoeffer has here understood the essence of the enigmatic Ecclesiastes. Not the common Platonic dualist, despairing translation and interpretation of Ecclesiastes' view of vanity as a modern form of existen-

tialist 'meaninglessness' or futility, but the advocate of enjoyment of each moment of pleasure as a blessing and gift from God, not forever, but for *now*.

But Bonhoeffer also rightly wrestles with the meaning of the last verse of Ecclesiastes 3 refracted through one of his favourite hymns and a solid, earthy sense of biblical eschatology, not the common escapology of our time. 'Nothing is lost', he says to Bethge, 'everything is taken up again in Christ, ... transfigured in the process, becoming transparent, clear and free from all self-seeking and desire. Christ brings it all again as God intended it to be ... The doctrine of the restoration of all things ... which is derived from Ephesians 1:10, *recapitulation* (Irenaeus), is a magnificent conception, and full of comfort. This is the way in which the words "God seeketh again that which is passed away" are fulfilled'. Again, Bonhoeffer is helped by music, a line from the Augustinian *O bone Jesu* by Schutz. 'Is not this phrase [O good Jesus], with its combination of ecstatic longing and transparent devotion, suggestive of the restoration of all earthly desire? Restoration of course must not be confused with

sublimation, for sublimation is *sarx* [flesh] (and pietistic?!), and restoration "spirit", not in the sense of spiritualisation, ... but as ... a new creation, through the Holy Spirit' (*Letters*, 1953, 56-58).

In the end, Cave's craving for his partner (presumably), his *carnal* desire to cradle her in his arms, is sanctified by the in-*carn*-ate One of the cradle, cross, resurrection and consummation. The God of the Incarnation, is – as Bonhoeffer knew well, while longing for his bride-to-be beyond the prison walls – an intimate interventionist. This intimacy and subtlety, making space for even the most horrific human evil, means that God did not intervene to save Bonhoeffer from the Nazis. But as Scott Holland notes nicely concerning Bonhoeffer's hanging on the 9th of April, 1945: 'I would like to think that in the end, in the dark beauty of worldly holiness, for Bonhoeffer, the *Infinite and the intimate became one*' (*Cross Currents*, Fall 2000, Vol. 50 Issue 3). In Bonhoeffer's own words approaching the gallows, and the everlasting arms, for me 'this is the beginning of life' in even greater intimacy.

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