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# Liberation, the Jesus Mode: Reflections on the Gospels for the B-Cycle

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sometimes do very bad things as a testimony to the absolute. They act as protectors of the absolute. The one absolute is that no one's understanding of the truth is the whole truth. The Demon is not willing to acknowledge that it is possible to know truth without calling into question the possibility that someone else may know it differently.

Every religion is both a way of the masses and a way of discipleship. The way of discipleship generally leads to transformed living that avoids violence. But the way of the masses is also essential because no people can exist outside a world of ultimate order and meaning.

Discovering the power of the Christian story may lead the disciple into the way of the transformed mind, wherein the disciple becomes involved in making things whole. Hence the disciple overcomes the natural inclination to do violence. Many bad things may be done in the name of religion even though the pilgrim is not a violent person. Gautama does not do bad things in the name of religion (he is a pilgrim), but some Buddhists do. Jesus does not do bad things in the name of religion, but some Christians do. Only the pilgrim knows what Martin Luther proclaimed, that we are simultaneously saints and sinners.

Wentz maintains that the way of the disciple is the way out of violence. As a pilgrim I become a person who has been touched by the truth of my own story, and am drawn to search for a more complete vision of that truth. As preachers we need to help people to see the significance of everyday events as part of the need to find order and meaning. If this does not happen it will do little good to recite words about salvation and reconciliation. Then people will be content with the order and meaning that their culture already shares with them, the way of the masses. The possibility of discipleship is opened up for those who, in coming to terms with their own stories, begin to see the relevance of the stories which are called religions.

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## **Liberation, The Jesus Mode: Reflections on the Gospels for the B-Cycle**

Joseph G. Donders

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987

275 + xi pp., n.p.

These "reflections on Gospels" flow from the heart of a Catholic priest (ordained 1957) who was and remains a missionary. A member of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, he was for 15 years Professor in Philosophy

at the University of Nairobi and chaplain to the St. Paul's Catholic Students Community there. In 1984 he became the first director of the African Faith and Justice Network of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association, Washington, D.C. These biographical data help to explain both the compelling affirmative claim these meditations (for they are more meditations than "reflections") make upon one as well as the dominant presentation of Jesus as liberator. (Donders has also written *Non-Bourgeois Theology: An African Experience of Jesus*.)

Whereas Protestant theology has characteristically stressed that the cross-resurrection is the liberating or redeeming event, appropriated by faith, *Donders sets us into the presence of the earthly Jesus so that we walk, watch, argue, and are surprised by him, and in his liberated presence become liberated*. Meditation number 51, on Mark 10:35-45, reminds us that in meditating on "he gave his life in ransom for many" we should "not think only of his death" but "should think of him all during his life": Jesus' birth, baptism, prayers, fasting, miracles, contacts with people, arrest, passion, and crucifixion—all of it "was because he wanted to show us, who we human beings really *are*, full of possibilities, full of potentialities, good and divine, helpful and glorious, loving and sustaining, *full of the glory of God*, great and mighty, open, and relating to all. It was because he wanted to show us that we aren't nobodies, but somebodies—able to break through ourselves caring for all" (247f.). Or on Mark 6:7-13: "Prophets bring people to themselves [ie as in self realization], they liberate, they make people see. That is what Jesus did, that light in our darkness, when he showed us by his life what a human being—equipped with the Spirit of God—can do, and he said, 'You will be able to do even greater things than I did!' " (178).

This liberating perspective of seeing in Jesus what we can be and do opens up intriguing interpretations of the Gospels. What saves this perspective from degenerating into a mush of "positive thinking" and "good stroke pop psychology" is not the cross itself as we might expect—for Jesus throughout is the one who liberates us by being and acting as a liberated person (authentic love and care, breaking through legalisms, prophetic truthfulness, inclusive vision, etc.) at whatever cost (and it is costly)—but a firm hold on the divinity of Jesus and the great framework of the Kingdom. In our service we should not lose "sight of our mission to take care that this whole world is going to change, changing in the kingdom he came to bring, a kingdom of justice and peace, an honorable place for all" (67). That, in fact, is what Jesus learned to do too: he came to do more than heal toothaches and stomachaches. "he came to change the whole world, he came to introduce the kingdom of God, and that is more than healing a sickness or two" (61). And so Donders, while being intensely personal, keeps pushing back our boundaries and enlarging our world with its huge problems and needs and opportunities. For the resurrected Jesus says, "I came to Jerusalem... died... rose... to start a movement... that should reach the whole of the earth... touch the whole of humanity... spiritually in the deepest of depths" (112f.).

Donders writes in an oral format that turns his "reflections" into a kind of poetry. And he has the observant eye of the prophet-poet. Jesus means different things in different eras. I believe Donders is right in holding up Jesus as liberator in our era. We can learn much of what that means from these Gospel interpretations.

One hermeneutical question occurs: Donders' portrait of Jesus seems more appropriate to Luke (ie C-cycle) than to Mark, for in Luke Jesus is the prophet-herald of the New Age who dies the prophet's death, to be vindicated by God in the resurrection.

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## **Meditating on the Word**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Edited and translated by David McI. Gracie

Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986

154 pp., \$9.50 paperback.

## **Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality**

Simon Tugwell, O.P.

Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1985

232 pp. plus index, \$12.95 U.S.

If for no other reason, David Gracie is to be thanked for adding to the writings of Bonhoeffer available in English. *Meditating on the Word* is a collection of eleven occasional writings on meditation and the place of Scripture in the Christian life, the longest of which is the beginning of a meditation on Psalm 119 written in 1939 and 1940. None has been previously translated into English.

As with so much of Bonhoeffer's work, these meditations and sermons tend to raise more questions than they answer. This is partially because of the unfinished nature of so much that we have from Bonhoeffer and partly because he was attempting to find his way theologically and ethically in the midst of continuous crisis. While there is little sense of ambiguity in any particular writing—Why does Bonhoeffer always seem so sure of himself?—the sense of ambiguity in the entire corpus is almost overwhelming.

If Bonhoeffer the spiritual writer has some value for us today it is primarily to link us to the positive Pietist tradition within Lutheranism