

2003

Beyond Pacifism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology During War

Dan Rohrer

Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rohrer, Dan (2003) "Beyond Pacifism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology During War," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol3/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Denison Journal of Religion by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Beyond Pacifism: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology During War

Dan Rohrer

Introduction: Theology of a Martyr

If there were such a thing as a “pop” theologian, capturing the imaginations of the public, Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be the one. He does so most noticeably in terms of his fascinating biography, the crowning achievement of which is martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis. Further investigation uncovers his involvement, despite his deep pacifist commitments, in a bombing plot that failed twice to take Hitler’s life. This is the same man who wrote *The Cost of Discipleship*, an outline of the requirements of Christianity, and *Life Together*, a blueprint for Christian fellowship. The ostensible discrepancy between his recourse to violence and the serene desires of *Life Together* is enigmatic enough; his later theological thoughts, however, as given in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, prove even less accessible and more puzzling – yet nonetheless find themselves in the mainstream.

In at least one way, this popularity is fitting: the relationship between Christianity and the secular order is often thought to be the center of these letters. Certainly this was the opinion of those heralding the Death of God movement, which drew quite heavily on Bonhoeffer’s later meditations. Regardless of the polemical moves that such movements have made in claiming Bonhoeffer’s voice, there is a genuine concern for the secular order in these letters. He speaks of his preference for talking with atheists about matters of faith, and wonders about his now famous notion of a “world come of age,” a human society that seems to be self-sufficient apart from belief in God. In these and many other ways, Bonhoeffer’s theology was charged with political concern. Yet he endures mainly as a devotional author. In a time of war in America, it is important to recover the political intent of Bonhoeffer’s theology.

The academic discourse about Bonhoeffer tends to center on *Discipleship* and the *Letters and Papers*, as well as his later appropriation by various secular philosophies, like the Death of God movement. The highly political theologian

Karl Barth provided what are perhaps the greatest praise and sharpest criticisms of Bonhoeffer using these categories. Barth, whose enormous bibliography attests to his penchant for writing, nonetheless expressed the desire simply to insert sections of *The Cost of Discipleship* into the *Church Dogmatics*, praising Bonhoeffer's discussion of cheap grace as the best work on the subject (Dorrien 2000: 153). Barth also praised Bonhoeffer's willingness to tackle "the Jewish question" so aggressively during World War II, while other prominent thinkers were silently complicit with the Nazi agenda (Dorrien 2000: 156). Despite this praise, he accused Bonhoeffer of being an incompetent theologian, especially in his latest writings. His appropriation by secular philosophies in the Sixties was his own fault. Also, (with reference to accusing Barth of "positivism of revelation") he argued that Bonhoeffer was guilty of latching onto catchy phrases, writing about them, and abandoning them (Dorrien 2000: 156-7). Barth provides a stance of praise and criticism that serves as an interesting entry-point for looking at Bonhoeffer, both in his merits and shortcomings.

The problem, most likely due to Bonhoeffer's early death, is the underdeveloped nature of his *Letters and Papers*. *Discipleship* and *Life Together* provide wonderful descriptions of the proper way to follow Jesus and coexist with other Christians in community, respectively. These works are fully articulated and accessible, at least to those familiar with theological language. The works from Tegel, however, prove arcane even to the initiated, hence Barth's doubt of their theological credibility. If one reads *Letters and Papers* with respect to the historical situation, however, and in the context of his earlier works, some fairly developed ideas emerge.

A theme that governs his final, inaccessible works, usually implicitly, is a response to the capitulation of German churches to the Nazi agenda – or, even worse, their enthusiastic endorsement of it. In many ways his theological writings are political tracts targeting what he perceived as un-Christian behavior. Indeed, Bonhoeffer explicitly resisted the Reich in several of his writings, including his work with Barth on the Barmen Confession and his involvement with his seminarians in writing a letter of protest to Hitler. This political involvement characterized the most enduring, useful theology of the time: it used Biblical images and language as weapons against dangerous political situations. In this same genre of writing, the Confessing Church's letter to Hitler asserts the proper use of biblical symbols against the Nazis rather than in support of them. Though Bethge, Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, does not give the full text of the memorandum to Hitler, he includes an outline of its seven major points:

(1) Was the de-Christianization of the people official government policy? (2) What was the actual or ostensible meaning of the Party formula "positive Christianity"? (3) The recent "pacification work" muzzled the churches. (4) In breach of existing agreements, young people, schools, universities, and the press were forcibly being de-Christianized under the slogan "deconfessionalization." (5) The new ideology was imposing an anti-Semitism that necessarily committed people to a *hatred of the Jews*, which parents had to combat in the education of their children. (6) The church saw reason for anxiety in the popular materialistic morality, the exalting of the loyalty oath, manipulation of the Reichstag elections, concentration camps that mocked a constitutional state, and the activities, unhampered by legal scrutiny, of the Gestapo. (7) Spying and eavesdropping exert an unhealthy influence. (Bethge 2000: 532: emphasis Bethge's)

This shows a clear concern beyond the traditional boundaries of the Christian church, reaching into the realm of public advocacy. Most striking is the Christian concern for the Jewish population, above and beyond the tradition of anti-Semitism of the Church. Bonhoeffer and his seminarians were involved in lobbying the government on behalf of others, not just Christians. This is a matter that will warrant further discussion in a later section on Bonhoeffer and Judaism. The overall concern of this letter, evident from Bethge's outline, is the harmful way in which Germany's political climate influenced religion. This concern would drive Bonhoeffer from letter-writing to authoring books against the Nazis, the first of which was *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The Cost of Discipleship: Persecution for the Gospel's Sake

The first of Bonhoeffer's "mature" works is *The Cost of Discipleship*, a treatise on the nature of Christian life that is at once quite orthodox, appealing to the Lutheran roots of German Protestantism, and quite radical. In the context out of which Bonhoeffer writes, recovering an orthodox sense of Jesus' ministry was a radical venture; it involved extricating Christianity from the nationalist trappings with which the Nazi Party had outfitted it. Rather than Christian discipleship for the sake of Hitler, the Nazi Party, or Germany, he describes a discipleship for the sake of Christ and Christ's suffering. Bonhoeffer attempts to come to terms with the aspect of discipleship that involves suffering, which was omnipresent in World War II Europe. The suffering that he describes is not senseless and inexplicable, as much of the climate seemed to be at the time; it

is suffering for the sake of Christ, imitating Him even to martyrdom. Such a grim conception of Christianity finds firm biblical grounding as well as precedent within the tradition; Bonhoeffer quotes Luther's notion that Christians are those "who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake" (Bonhoeffer 1937: 101). (It is important to remember that Bonhoeffer really meant what he said about martyrdom, as his final fate reminds us.)

The term "obedience" is essential to *The Cost of Discipleship*, and is linked to belief. As he explains, "...only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes" (Bonhoeffer 1937: 69, italics his). For Bonhoeffer, these propositions cannot be separated from each other or from Christ. He is fond of constructing his arguments in this fashion, using two interdependent propositions to explain his theology; this is the same tactic he uses to explain the individual in community in *Life Together* (to which I will turn in the section on that book). Christianity cannot be collapsed into one aspect or the other; it is both belief and obedience, one flowing from the other and grounded in Christ. The effect of this belief and obedience is death, either metaphorically or literally – which makes it distinctly Christian. Apropos to this, his scripture reference for this concept is Mark 8, the passage about taking up one's cross and following Jesus.

In relation to this concept, one of Bonhoeffer's greatest indictments of the church's role in the workings of the Reich is his concept of cheap grace, with which he begins *The Cost of Discipleship*. His own words on this idea are quite compelling and should speak for themselves, as Barth felt:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. (Bonhoeffer 1937: 47)

This is the essence of the entire book, especially the first half. Cheap grace is an expression of the belief-and-obedience relationship that is so essential to Bonhoeffer's thought, and the church is irresponsible when it offers the benefits of belief without the suffering of obedience. "Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares," he writes (Bonhoeffer 1937: 45). While compelling in its own right, this simile perhaps conjures images of Jesus' cleansing of the temple, by which Bonhoeffer would be pointing his finger at a church that betrays its essence in favor of cultural success. Like a peddler of cheap goods, the church has begun to offer its "customers" all of the benefits of

Christianity without any of the difficult parts, the parts that require discipleship, taking up one's cross and following.

The kind of Christianity that he advocates in opposition to this is one of costly grace. As he stresses many times, grace cost God his son, so it must cost humans something as well (Bonhoeffer 1937:48, for example). Costly grace is the reality of the disciple, the person who follows Christ to death metaphorically or literally. If the church offers people anything but this harsh picture of the faith, it is guilty of peddling cheap grace and therefore is advocating discipleship without Jesus Christ (an oxymoron). *The Cost of Discipleship* is often cast in individual terms; *Life Together*, to complement this, concentrates on the individual's role within the church community.

Life Together

As discussed earlier, the most enduring critical label for Karl Barth's theology was that of "positivism of revelation," that Christians must swallow all aspects of the faith or none at all; Barth expressed bitterness at this inaccurate label many years after Bonhoeffer used it to describe him, though others found it quite fitting. If Barth is guilty of positivism of revelation, some critics say, then the early Bonhoeffer was guilty of positivism of the church (as in Pangritz 2000: 12-13). This over-confidence in ecclesiology was characteristic of Barth's work during the Thirties, up until his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. His doctoral thesis, later published as *The Communion of Saints*, was a sociological inquiry into the workings of the church, and displayed great faith in this ecclesial organ. This uncritical view of the church runs through *The Cost of Discipleship* as well. *Life Together*, a book wholly devoted to the role of the church, affords the opportunity to ask what Bonhoeffer thought of the church as the activities of the Nazi party escalated. In a country whose churches bowed to nationalism so readily, what would an ecclesial positivist think of the church?

Before engaging entirely with *Life Together*, some discussion of Bonhoeffer's relevant ecclesial and political background is necessary. The previous section on *The Cost of Discipleship* described the role Bonhoeffer prescribed for the individual Christian's commitment to Christ. *Life Together* complements this analysis by describing the group in which the disciple must operate. In point of fact, Bonhoeffer argues that the individual cannot exist without the group, and vice versa. This takes the same form as his thoughts on the inter-relationship of belief and obedience, as described in the previous section. The group must adhere to certain simple rules for fellowship, rules that do not allow

for the intrusion of nationalist agendas like that of the Nazis. This is the way in which Bonhoeffer's seemingly simple book of group devotion carries with it a political meaning, as does all church activity and theology.

In Bonhoeffer's time the church aligned with the government, as exemplified by the swastika hanging next to the cross in most churches. By abdicating its critical voice, the church bought into the German nationalism that the swastika symbolized. Regardless of the moral valuation that subsequent generations are able to make of Nazis, it is as inappropriate for the church to so enthusiastically endorse a nationalist program as it is for a government to officially sanction a religion. In Bonhoeffer's time, the churches had mortgaged their right to stand in opposition to any of the government's policies, favoring a stance that sacralized the new political order. Bonhoeffer's underground church at Finkenwalde stands as one example of a group that opposed Nazi rule, keeping alive the prophetic voice of the church.¹

Just as he sets up an inseparable dependence between obedience and belief, Bonhoeffer sees that the individual and community are interdependent. To separate the one from the other is to sacrifice both. While both *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers From Prison* testify to the strength of the individual, as described above, both of these works must be seen in light of *Life Together*. A temptation when reading Bonhoeffer is to stress too much the radical individualism that his later works describe, leaving out the necessity for community that grounds all of his work. Without *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer's work can be used to reinforce the very culture that he criticizes. The climax toward which his work moves is that of a specific kind of Christian community, one in which fervent believers share equally: daily prayer, collective singing, and so forth. Most importantly, the symbols and stories of that community are not accessible to disinterested parties from outside of the faith; leaving elements of Christianity open to people outside of the community opens them to the "profanation" that Bonhoeffer discusses in his letter from 30 April 1944. In many ways, even while he was writing from his solitary prison cell, Bonhoeffer always existed within this quasi-monastic community of faith, even if only through Bethge's visits to smuggle letters out of the prison.

In the environment from which Bonhoeffer writes, his theology can be seen as nothing less than political subversion. Making a statement regarding the common life of Christians was an affirmation of Christianity at its most basic level: it is the fellowship of Christians in and through Christ, nothing more. It is not the nationalist agenda of the Nazis. It is not the condoning of the fate of scapegoat

groups. By disassociating itself from political agendas such as these, Christianity cannot avoid a certain amount of political involvement, lest it be at the mercy of politics and culture. Yet this essence – the affirmation of transcendent goals, which make earthly goals relative – was the very thing that caused Bonhoeffer's political engagement and should cause similar behavior in Christian communities today.

Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* was his most widely read book during his lifetime (Bethge 469). Today this distinction is held by *Letters and Papers from Prison*, but both are susceptible to a common problem when placed into the hands of a wealthy, American audience. There is a danger of removing Bonhoeffer's struggle from its context and reading it solely from the perspective of a middle-class, North American citizen. *Letters and Papers from Prison* is the personal journey of one Christian against the Reich – which can have implications for the American citizen in this democratic republic, but is not easily analogous to it. *Life Together* is not meant to be read with purely American eyes; it is the struggle for a communal Protestant identity in the face of national socialism, not the rules for running a comfortable church in the suburbs. These works cannot be lifted wholesale from their context and be applied to American values and situations. There are ways of translating them, so to speak, but they do not preach directly to the realities of a democratic republic under post-industrial market capitalism.

Therefore readers need to be aware of the political realities that surrounded Bonhoeffer's writings, which condition the meanings of many of his statements. Take as an example one of the initial assertions on which *Life Together* builds: "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this... We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ" (Bonhoeffer 1954: 21). When approached with questions arising from North American spirituality, this appears to be a somewhat challenging but fairly ordinary statement of faith. It is a call to live in the Church, and perhaps a statement of that Church's position of dominance, as opposed to the marginal positions of other traditions. When viewed outside of this North American context, however, and in its original context, the text is much more dramatic and challenging, and certainly less ordinary. By the time Bonhoeffer wrote this book, many of the churches in Nazi Germany had capitulated – often willingly – to a new kind of Christendom, a marriage between the political agenda of a nation humiliated after World War One and the moral grounding of a church steeped in tradition.

The political realities of the time reveal the true importance of the text and simultaneously speak to why those realities are not addressed explicitly. There was need for tactful articulation of one's opinions in order to avoid a jail sentence. For Bonhoeffer this penal consequence became a reality anyway, not so much because of his writings (though they probably did not help) but because of his involvement in a plot to take Hitler's life.

Letters and Papers From Prison

Bonhoeffer provides possibilities and puzzles for Christianity after World War II. Starting his theological career very grounded in the traditions of German Lutheranism, his work reflects the concerns that arise out of that tradition: the faith/works debate, the significance of monasticism, the role of the church after the Reformation, and so on. Yet his writings from the last years of his life represent a different stance on his tradition; even more, they present a perceptive analysis of the relationship between Christianity and the secular order, a problem that has been increasingly important in the recent history of the faith. It is a matter of utmost importance in America today, especially in terms of defining something that looks like a Christian stance on America's aggression and militancy. In many ways America's churches are faced with the same challenge of the German churches during World War II: do they endorse the nationalist tendencies of the government or challenge them? The conclusions we arrive at today must be colored by Bonhoeffer's ruminations on the matter.

Letters and Papers from Prison represents a work that is in some ways fragmentary, in some ways cohesive. Interspersed between greetings to family and requests for clothes, books, and cigars are meditations on the state of Christianity in light of World War II. His thoughts are rooted in church tradition, biblical scholarship, and a deep faith commitment. These are things that should be kept in mind when reading Bonhoeffer's harsh critique of Christianity; he remained, until his last moments, a pastor and a believer in personal prayer. Also, he was writing to a fellow Christian and pastor, Eberhard Bethge, with most of his criticisms. These facts do not mitigate his critique but prevent the kinds of readings that insist that Bonhoeffer presages the Death of God movement. They are also useful in sorting out what exactly he means by some of his seemingly anti-Christian comments, as we shall see later.

The matter at hand is not the death of Christianity or God in the face of secularism; rather it is the stance of the Christian faith and the church, both very much alive, on secularism. Bonhoeffer is of the mind that secularism represents

a good thing for faith. It allows the faithful to think of God not as *deus ex machina*, that which takes over where human reason gives out, but as something more central – indeed, the most central thing. In this way, secularism is a corrective for the Christian faith – not a replacement for it, as interpreters like Harvey Cox might say. Bonhoeffer thought about Christianity and secularism in the same way that Paul thought about Christianity and the law, as the next section suggests.

Bonhoeffer and Paul

Rather than being a philosophical, existential argument, Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* is a Christian argument after the style of Paul. Bonhoeffer makes distinctions between the concepts of religion (Christianity is perhaps the truest form of religion, but even Christianity is shedding its religious aspects in a world coming of age), the church (the place where religion and faith meet, and the organization in which the individual must exist), and faith (a person's relationship with God above and beyond religious systems). He sees the need for the church and the person of faith to shed the parts of the faith that are "religious." This is a move that builds on Paul's meditations on the relationship between the gospel and the system of Jewish legalism.

In order to understand Bonhoeffer's argument we must place it within its biblical context. He uses Paul's discussion of gospel versus law as a springboard for his concept of "religionless Christianity." Krister Stendahl writes of Paul and the law-gospel debate:

But he himself thought, albeit with some arrogance, that for the sake of Lord and the church he had to deal straightforwardly with such issues as what had happened to the law, to that wall of partition, now that the Messiah had come. The relationship of primitive Christianity to the law could possibly have been avoided, glanced over, or even enthusiastically overcome in spirituality, but Paul settled down at that wall of partition and kept thinking about it. (Stendahl 1976: 71)

Stendahl sees Paul as the only intellectual in the early Christian church, giving a unique character to his ministry. Other apostles preached to the Gentiles, as Paul did, but Paul's uniqueness came in his continual meditation on the relevance of the law now that the Messiah had come. Even if one believes that all of the letters attributed to Paul are really his, they do not reveal a systematic theology of the kind found today; the bits of theology that show through are the thoughts that would be important to Paul's pastoral and missionary roles. He was one of a num-

ber of apostles who saw their mission as being directed toward the Gentiles. This meant that Christian theology must not rest on the same foundation as that of Judaism: the law. There is some disagreement in the Gospels as to Jesus' relationship to the law, but Paul's conception of Jesus and Christian apostleship is clear. He knows only Christ and him crucified (1 Cor), and describes the scene of the Eucharist. These things, not the law, are necessary for Christianity. Despite the desires of some "judaizers" within Christianity, Paul saw that the Christian religion must transcend Jewish legalism for the sake of Christ's crucifixion.

Bonhoeffer's argument regarding Christianity and the secular order is analogous to Paul's argument regarding Christianity and the law. He combines pastoral and theological concerns, though never in a systematic way. He fixes his intellect on one problem, the relationship of Christianity to the secular order. As with the law-gospel debate, the problem of secularism "could possibly have been avoided, glanced over, or even enthusiastically overcome in spirituality..." but Bonhoeffer settled on that problem and kept thinking about it. He sees the need for a kind of transcendence; where Paul saw a need to transcend the law through Christ, Bonhoeffer saw the need to transcend the "religious" parts of Christianity in favor of a more mature faith. The part of Christianity that is "religion" is that which caused the German churches to bow to the Nazis and combine the cross with the swastika. It is the religiosity that Bonhoeffer describes with such abhorrence in a letter to Eberhard Bethge, the kind of pietistic jargon that makes Bonhoeffer so uncomfortable. It is the cheap grace that he condemns in *The Cost of Discipleship*, the offering of the best parts of Christianity without the discipline and obedience that accompany them. This is the state of the Christian "religion," necessitating the shedding of religion in favor of something greater. For Bonhoeffer, this is an experience of God that, through an embrace of secularism, is more genuine than the experience that comes through "religion." True to form, he suggests ethical implications to his theology; for example, the church should give away its acquired wealth and have its members work in secular callings.

These thoughts are perhaps both radical and biblical. Paul argues that one need not be faithful to the law to be faithful to Christ; Bonhoeffer argues that one need not have religion to attain salvation. He writes, "The Pauline question whether [circumcision] is a condition of justification seems to me in the present-day terms to be whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from [circumcision] is also freedom from religion" (30 April 1944: "circumcision" originally rendered in Greek). Jesus must not be associated with one stage in

human development, the law. In this way Bonhoeffer argues that the rise of secularism is a good thing, helping humanity to shed religious pretension in favor of a greater understanding of Christ.

Letters and Papers: Theology During Wartime

Obviously the work of a theologian like Dietrich Bonhoeffer cannot be reduced to engagement with one issue or even several. The topics he engages are numerous and diverse, rising to the intellectual demands of the chaotic time in which he lived. This is quite useful for gaining a sense of theology as issue-oriented rather than a timeless (and possibly irrelevant) discipline. Bonhoeffer's thought is submerged in the time and engaged with its intricacies and challenges.

Indeed, engagement with the public domain is the very stuff from which Bonhoeffer's Christianity is made. It is the heir to the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures in which God elected critical voices to make divine pronouncements on corrupt structures. The Christian Scriptures are the story of a political radical, a messiah who reigns not as a king but as a servant (the ultimate political expression), who dies at the hands of the political and religious elite: Pilate and the Pharisees, representatives of the systems of the Roman Empire and the Jewish religion of legalism, respectively. In this sense the Christian operates within a tradition founded on radical political engagement, not endorsement of corrupt governments.

The picture of Christianity that Bonhoeffer paints is between these two extremes. It disavows the purely spiritual forms of Christianity that are useless to everyone but the person holding the beliefs, but does not require such a high degree of public engagement as to endorse Nazism. Spirituality is to be something that drives one into public engagement due to the very nature of Christianity. As he says in a letter to Eberhard Bethge on 3 August 1944, "We must move out again into the open air of intellectual discussion with the world, and risk saying controversial things, if we are to get down to the serious problems of life" (Bonhoeffer 1970: 378). For his theology, this meant risking the rejection of such luminaries as Karl Barth; for his life, this meant the ultimate sacrifice.

Some of Bonhoeffer's comments from *Letters and Papers from Prison* further clarify his sense of politics in theology. He frames an argument about the nature of the Kingdom of God in terms of the events occurring around him (quite literally, in the case of this air raid):

If in the middle of an air raid God sends out the gospel call to his kingdom in baptism, it will be quite clear what that kingdom is and what

it means. It is a kingdom stronger than war and danger, a kingdom of power and authority, signifying eternal terror and judgment to some, and eternal joy and righteousness to others, not a kingdom of the heart, but one as wide as the earth, not transitory but eternal, a kingdom that makes a way for itself and summons men to itself to prepare its way, a kingdom for which it is worth while risking our lives. (Bonhoeffer 1970: 304)

This is “not a kingdom of the heart,” something to be understood in purely spiritual terms; it is a kingdom with eternal implications that subvert the idolatry of public life, something that makes the kinds of demands on a person that Bonhoeffer describes in *The Cost of Discipleship*, i.e., death. In this way he makes a case for public engagement being intrinsic to Christianity.

The spiritualized nature of Christianity is due in large part to the world’s coming of age, a concept that is critical to the understanding of Bonhoeffer. First I will explain the historical trend toward spiritualization, then tie that into a discussion of the world come of age. The original vision of Christianity is similar to the above quote about the Kingdom of God: “Christianity puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; we make room in ourselves, to some extent, for God and the whole world” (310). The beginning of this transformation of society is something he traces to the 1300s, roughly (Bonhoeffer 1970: 325). As he says, “The displacement of God from the world, and from the public part of human life, led to the attempt to keep his place secure at least in the sphere of the ‘personal’, the ‘inner’, and the ‘private’ (Bonhoeffer 1970: 344). This retreat, coupled with the churches’ sanction of Nazism, led to the terrible state of German Christianity during World War II. Hence Bonhoeffer’s desire to associate Christianity with the public sphere in a responsible way. Again, he asserts the total demand of Christianity upon one’s life, even to the point of death: “Jesus claims for himself and the Kingdom of God the whole of human life in all its manifestations” – not just healing sickness or treating sickness as the fruits of evil (341-42).

By the time he writes, the world’s coming of age is nearly complete. By this he means that the world has come to understand itself without using God as an *a priori* or *deus ex machina*: God is neither the precondition for all thought nor the recourse of thought once reason has run out. Humanity has developed to such a point that it does not need God for such answers.

Here there is great potential for misunderstanding Bonhoeffer’s meaning. Most important to understanding the world come of age, religionless

Christianity, and the church's role in all of it is a distinction between *religion* and *Christianity* (as manifested by the church). I've read too many sloppy commentaries that continue to conflate these two things when Bonhoeffer spells out the difference between them to a great extent, in terms of circumcision. The letters from 30 April and 5 May 1944 broach the topic, and Bonhoeffer returns to it on 8 June. Circumcision (in the Pauline sense) is important in establishing Bonhoeffer's argument that religion is not a precondition of faith. He argues against religion, the same kind of religion that yielded Jewish legalism and other forms of exclusion from God. He argues for the inclusive aspects of Christianity that flow from Christ.

Beyond this coming of age, by which the world understands itself, Bonhoeffer calls for understanding the world better than it understands itself. This can only be done with the gospels and Jesus Christ. Speaking about God in a non-religious way – that is, in the world come of age – is meant to expose the ways in which the world is without God:

When we speak of God in a 'non-religious' way, we must speak of him in such a way that the godlessness of the world is not in some way concealed, but rather revealed, and thus exposed to an unexpected light. The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age (Bonhoeffer 1970: 362)

This coming of age is good in its honesty about the world's relationship to God. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that humans almost always operate as though God did not exist; non-religious discussion, therefore, exposes that kind of living before God without God (a phrase of Bonhoeffer's).

Bonhoeffer describes a vision of Christianity that copes with the suffering of wartime, and in this sense his theology is politically charged. In the face of religion's failure to deal with the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer described religion as a vestige that the world has almost entirely abandoned in favor of secularism. While religion is obsolete, given the ability of humans to think without recourse to God, there is still a place for the arcane discipline of Christianity. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer – His Significance for North Americans*, Rasmussen rightly devotes much attention to the role of worship in the secular environment. This question is essential for Bonhoeffer, though perhaps his second most puzzling point (the first being his notion of the secular interpretation of religious symbols, about which he continually promises explanation but gives only a few sentences).

Offering an explanation requires recourse to biographical information. As I mentioned above, Bonhoeffer's final journey to Flossenbürg demonstrates his commitment to worship, even when faced with death at the hands of the secular order. He led a kind of church service among himself and the other prisoners who were to be killed. He would not have done so, since one of the prisoners was atheist, but that prisoner requested that he continue (this suggests that evangelism is best achieved through sensitivity and acceptance of difference, unlike the fundamentalist concept of evangelism). Before he climbed the gallows, Bonhoeffer prayed in solitude. Clearly his theology – which always translated into his ethics – redefined the relationship between Christianity and the secular order, not doing away with Christianity but describing its appropriate place in a changing world. This was a theology and ethics that was pacifist, but which made allowances for Bonhoeffer's involvement in a plot to kill Hitler, the crime for which he was imprisoned and executed. Just as one cannot differentiate between Bonhoeffer's Christology, ontology, and ethics, one cannot entirely separate Christianity and political involvement.

Conclusion

In some ways Bonhoeffer is radical through his orthodoxy – he is identified with the so-called “neo-orthodox” or “neo-Reformation” theologians of World War II, like Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth. The recovery of Martin Luther's sense of monasticism is integral to *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The interpretation of Christian tradition, including copious exegesis of biblical passages and commentaries on church history and the Lutheran tradition, is integral to Bonhoeffer and serves as the basis for many of his radical claims.

However, something in Bonhoeffer reaches beyond easy identification with the neo-orthodox camp and a recovery of orthodoxy. Some of his ideas are quite radical on their own. Germany's situation was so desperate in Bonhoeffer's eyes that he dismissed traditional conceptions of discipleship, community, and ethics; the ultimate result of this dismissal was involvement in a plot to kill Hitler, which failed twice. (In his notes from July/August 1944, he scrawls about the collapse of Christian ethics.)

In the world come of age, there must be no distinction between private and public. The Bible does not make such a distinction. Jesus is always concerned with the whole person, as in the Sermon on the Mount; and the symbol of the heart does not mean an “inner” life in the sense that we mean it today, but it

means the total person. For the Christian, this means giving oneself totally to Christ and following in his footsteps, which lead to death at the hands of the secular culture.

Notes

1. Calling the Confessing Church a church is somewhat problematic, depending on one's definition of the word. It was not a church in the way that modern Americans use the word, since it did not have a traditional hierarchy, membership, and so forth; it was a group of ministers who disagreed with the responses of their own churches to the Nazi regime.

Works Consulted:

Bethge, Eberhard. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Ed. Victoria Barnett. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1976.

_____. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972.

_____. *Life Together*. Trans. John W. Doberstein. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

Casalis, George. *Portrait of Karl Barth*. Trans. Robert McAfee Brown. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1964.

Dorrien, Gary. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

Jehle, Frank. *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002.

Rasmussen, Larry L. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972.

Stendahl, Krister. *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.