

## Bonhoeffer's Pacifism

*By Ronald Osborn*

In times of war Dietrich Bonhoeffer is sometimes cited as an example of authentic Christian resistance to tyranny through force. In a July 11, 2003 *Washington Post* article, provocatively entitled, "Bonhoeffer: Thou Shalt Kill", Philip Kennicott, for example, wrote that any serious debate about pacifism must deal with the question, What about Hitler? Bonhoeffer, he suggested, is a compelling example of a conscientious Christian concerned with radical discipleship who nevertheless saw that violence was morally justified in the face of Nazi evil.

It is unlikely, however, that Bonhoeffer himself would have accepted the distinction of "just warrior" sometimes bestowed on him. He, of all Germany's wartime thinkers, believed that neither the church nor society could survive through compromises or utilitarian calculations, as must invariably be made by those who embrace acts of violence for the sake of social order. With Martin Doblmeier's recent documentary film and a new book by Stanley Hauerwas (*Performing the Faith*) focusing attention on Bonhoeffer's life and thought, it is worthwhile to recall the German pastor's challenging witness for peace.

Bonhoeffer expressed his commitment to Christian pacifism from the moment the National Socialists seized control in Germany. When asked by a student in 1934 what he would do if there was war, Bonhoeffer, breaking sharply with Luther's doctrine of obedience to the state, replied: "I will pray that God will give me the strength not to take up arms." Yet Bonhoeffer knew that war was likely and so that same year corresponded with Gandhi, arranging to visit him in India to study his methods, which he hoped to use against the Nazi government. The trip never occurred, but between 1935 and 1936 Bonhoeffer joined with several friends in Germany to form the House of the Brethren, a social movement based upon the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. In 1937, as the noose of Nazi tyranny tightened, Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* was published in which he charted a radical social ethic for believers, including nonviolence as a Christian imperative.

Bonhoeffer's hope of a Christian nonviolent resistance to fascism was not unrealistic, as history has proved. The French Huguenot village of Le Chambon Sur Lignon, whose story is told in Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, saved thousands of Jewish children through nonviolent noncooperation with Gestapo and Vichy authorities. The entire nation of Denmark, Hannah Arendt reported in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, likewise engaged in effective nonviolent resistance to the Nazis. When told that Jewish refugees must wear stars, the Danes declared that they would all wear stars, from the King on down. They mounted strikes and protests; they refused to repair German ships in their shipyards; they hid Jews in their homes; they ferried Jews to Sweden out of harm's way. Again, thousands of lives were saved. Nazi officials were thoroughly unnerved, bewildered and deflated by these actions. Many were converted. Eichmann was repeatedly forced to send specialists to Denmark to try to sort out the problem since his men on the ground could "no longer be trusted."

Yet these pacifist responses to Hitler's assault were rooted in Christian communities where the church could still be counted on for support and moral guidance. After Hitler's lightning-swift victory over France in 1940, and the jubilant response of his fellow German clergymen, Bonhoeffer realized that the ground had fallen out from under believers in Germany. It remained his conviction that the church must be a radical witness against violence. But with the church scattered and in disarray, the situation bore in on him as a personal ethical crisis: was it better for him to participate in the resistance, or to maintain his ethical rigorism in the face of Hitler's atrocities?

There was no acceptable answer to the question in Bonhoeffer's mind. He did not doubt that violence and coercion are tools denied to believers by Christ in the New Testament. But, he understood, to not allow himself to become guilty of violence might be the greatest guilt of all. "The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts," he wrote several months before his arrest in 1943. Germans faced a situation in which "every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant, and futile".

It was in this desperate situation—and in the midst of conspiring against Hitler—that Bonhoeffer wrote "After Ten Years", a declaration of spiritual and ethical convictions in the form of a letter to his close friends which some theologians consider his finest work. In this brief and epistolary meditation Bonhoeffer rejected the idea that "civil courage" requires prudential or self-interested calculations of the sort political "realism" demands. "Who stands fast?" he asked. "Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God—the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God."

What exactly did Bonhoeffer mean by "exclusive allegiance" to "the question and call of God"? Bonhoeffer's statement is perhaps best understood in light of Karl Barth, a critical influence on Bonhoeffer as a young theologian. According to Barth, the responsibility of the Christian in times of war is never to justify but always "to manifest a distinctive horror of war and aloofness from it". Pacifism, Barth taught, is the rule of the Christian life; the Kingdom of God, of necessity, stands over and against all human pretensions to power and control by force. And yet, Barth maintained, no word of God can be made absolute by humans in a way that limits the freedom of God to speak a new word in "an exceptional case". Hence, the Christian must be a pacifist and yet at the same time cannot be an "absolute" pacifist since this would amount to a denial of God's freedom to be God.

Barth's concept of the *Grenzfall*, the exceptional case, tempts the kind of casuistry that politicians, generals and theologians resort to when justifying acts of violence by the state. But neither secular realism nor natural law categories of "just war" were what Barth had in mind when he spoke of God's freedom to speak a new word. Rather, Richard Hays writes, his account of the moral life demands "a constant reliance on prayer and listening for the guidance of God, believing that God can and does address individuals specifically with particular instructions." Hence, "we read Scripture thoroughly with the intent of obeying exactly what is commanded there, while always listening prayerfully for the unlikely revelation that in a particular case we may be commanded to do something contrary to the rule given by Scripture."

Was Bonhoeffer's participation in the officer's plot final proof, then, of the failure of Christian pacifism in the face of radical evil? Or was he in fact living proof of the Barthian "exceptional case"? Bonhoeffer's own words in "After Ten Years" suggest that his subjective experience was very much that of an exceptional summons. His spiritual and moral breakthrough came not as a reasoned move in the direction of universal ethics, but as a sudden inner awareness of God's Real Presence and the divine call to action in his life. Examined closely, "After Ten Years" is in fact the very antithesis of every rationalization for violence, not least those offered by Bonhoeffer's fellow clergymen in support of Hitler. Bonhoeffer was, by his own account, engaged not in an act of just warfare but in an existential "venture of faith". Significantly, he did not act with any expectation of success (a central requirement in just war thinking). Nor did he see his actions as presenting a model for others to imitate. Rather, like Abraham binding Isaac to the altar, he saw his complicity in the plot against Hitler as the peculiar and terrible cross he was called to bear.

In the end, it was a cross in every sense. On April 9, 1945 Bonhoeffer was executed by the SS at Flossenbürg concentration camp for treason against the state. Yet Bonhoeffer's legacy lives on as pacifists and non-pacifists alike continue to wrestle with his challenging insistence on obedience to God's call amid all of the tensions and ambiguities of history.

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