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# Cross Currents

A Journal of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church



IN MEMORIAM:  
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER  
1906-1945

*CrossCurrents* is written by clergy and laypersons of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, with the purpose of aiding parishioners in reflection on the meaning of faith in light of contemporary life. Copies may be obtained at the church, on our website, or by mail on request.

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IN MEMORIAM:  
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# Religionless Christianity: an Introductory Reflection

by John S. Nieman

I first encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings as a first-year divinity school student in the 1980's in a class entitled "Introduction to Theological Education for the Ministry." The class was designed to introduce theological neophytes to the ways and means of thinking theologically. Our primary Bonhoeffer text was *Letters and Papers From Prison*, a collection of letters to his dear friend, Eberhard Bethge, first published in 1953, eight years after Bonhoeffer's execution.

Bonhoeffer sketched some key theological insights in those letters that excited me over twenty years ago when I first encountered them. In particular, he planted the seeds of what would become known in the 1960s as "secular theology." In his April 30, 1944 letter to Bethge, Bonhoeffer wrote of a "religionless Christianity."

We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.

Our whole nineteen-hundred-year-old Christian preaching and theology rest on the religious *a priori* of mankind. 'Christianity' has always been a form – perhaps the true form – of 'religion'. But if one day it becomes clear that this *a priori* does not exist at all, but was a historically conditioned and transient form of human self-expression, and if therefore man becomes radically religionless – and I think that that is already more or less the case (else how is it, for example, that this war, in contrast to all previous ones, is not calling forth any 'religious' reaction?) – what does that mean for Christianity?

If religion is only a garment of Christianity – and even this garment has looked very different at different times – then what is a religionless Christianity?

Those were amazing words to a twenty-four year old Episcopalian raised on the Sunday school coloring books and pulpit platitudes of a church in an insular New Jersey suburb. Bonhoeffer presented an exciting, intellectual challenge as he articulated *as a theologian* the logical conclusion of the enlightenment: the end of religion!

But it wasn't until much later that I began to appreciate that Bonhoeffer's theology could not properly be understood from the comfort of a classroom or church pew. It had to be embraced as the

expression of the momentous choices he had to make within his historical context.

Bonhoeffer intentionally traded the luxury of doing theology in a safe, shielded academic environment for doing it in the dirt of the incarnate nihilism of Nazi Germany. Religionless Christianity was not a theological concept to be discussed in the classroom. It was a necessity for faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a context in which religion had been co-opted by lies, lethargy and unmitigated power. For Bonhoeffer, the crucifixion had to mean not simply the death of religion, but also the *death of the God* heretofore packaged in the cloak of twentieth century western religion. Without that particular crucifixion in that particular historical moment, there could be no hope of true resurrection in the twentieth century.

In order to read Bonhoeffer's writings and reflect on his life story with integrity sixty years after his execution, we must face the same sorts of questions he faced. Where are the lies? How has religion been co-opted in our day? Where is the unmitigated power? What cloak of religion must die in order for the Gospel to live? What is a religionless Christianity?

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# Dietrich Bonhoeffer: a Biographical Overview

by Donna Wessel Walker

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most influential Protestant theologians of the twentieth century, although he died before the age of forty. Interest in his life and work grew after his death as his writings were collected, published, and then translated into English; three documentary films have been made about his life; and there is an international Bonhoeffer society. Who was this man whose life, witness, and writings have attracted so much interest, and whose ideas have had so much influence? What is Bonhoeffer's legacy for our times?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life story is the starting-point for much of the interest in him. The clarity and courage with which he opposed the Nazi regime in Germany and the calm strength he exhibited in prison and at his death made him a model and a symbol for many Christians after World War II. Bonhoeffer's objections to the use of power for evil, and to Christian complacency and complicity in such power made the witness of his life and work an inspiration and challenge to those who sought (and still seek) to understand the relationship between the Gospel, society and politics. As Bonhoeffer's writings were translated into English, and after the publication of Eberhard Bethge's biography in 1967 (revised, 1989 and 2000), interest in Bonhoeffer expanded and deepened, as readers realized that his work held important ideas about the whole of Christian life: individual discipleship, the life of the Christian community, and the challenge of living out the Gospel in the modern world. Bonhoeffer's witness and work remain both a challenge and an inspiration.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born with his twin sister Sabine in Breslau on February 4, 1906, among the younger of eight children. Both sides of his family were comfortable and well-established, holding old German values of idealism and humanism. The family was cultured, with a withering sense of humor: although several members were military men, the family loved to poke fun at the self-importance and pomposity of certain types of officers and politicians. There was much music in the home; indeed, early in his life Bonhoeffer considered pursuing a career as a concert pianist.

Bonhoeffer's father held the first chair in psychiatry in Germany, so their Berlin home was a center for intellectual discussion, although they disdained politics, as did most cultured, intellectual Germans in the early years of the twentieth century. It came as quite a surprise to this sophisticated, secular family when the youngest son, Dietrich, announced that he wanted to study theology at university,

although this interest did not necessarily mean that Bonhoeffer was devout or interested in pastoral work in the church. Germany had long been the leader in advanced theological work in Europe: the "higher criticism" of the Bible had begun in Tübingen in the early nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century German theologians were exploring the implications of philosophy, historical theory, on-going archaeological discoveries, and new work in the sciences. Academic theology in Germany was a highly abstract field, aimed at philosophical questions of being and meaning, not at practical needs of society or of the person in the pew.

Bonhoeffer had a brilliant career as a student at the University of Berlin. He finished his doctoral dissertation, a study of the nature of Christian community, at the impossibly early age of 21. Karl Barth called the work a "theological miracle." In the fall of 1930, Bonhoeffer went to New York for a post-doctoral year at Union Theological Seminary. At Union he was shocked at the theological flabbiness of both students and faculty ("they have no sense of heresy!" he wrote), but pleased with the casual give-and-take between faculty and students, so different from the rigid hierarchy of German universities. Bonhoeffer was challenged to new kinds of thinking by the social and political criticism based in the Gospel offered at Union by Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, among others. In New York he came under the influence of committed pacifists and began to understand pacifism both as a Christian absolute and as a viable solution to the vast problems unleashed by World War I (in which he had lost a beloved older brother). Another Union student, Frank Fisher, took Bonhoeffer to Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church and introduced him to the powerful preaching, fervent music, and vibrant life of the Black church. After a summer-long car trip across the United States, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to take up a professorship in Berlin; he went with a pile of records of Negro Spirituals, a host of new friends, and a well of experiences to draw on in the church struggle ahead.

The time in New York had given Bonhoeffer the distance and perspective to see that what was needed was an authentic Christian life and witness in the modern world, a witness far removed from the abstruse arguments of academic theology. It was in these years, during and just after his trip to the States, that Bonhoeffer underwent a great change in his attitude: he began to see the Sermon on the Mount as something to be lived rather than studied or wondered at; he made what Bethge calls the transition "from theologian to Christian."<sup>1</sup> No longer was theology an intellectual field in which Bonhoeffer could realize his academic ambitions; now Christianity was a way of life. He worried that his friends might find him fanatical, and he did not often speak directly of the great change he had undergone, but he was from this time on committed to living a Christian life in all its implications.

By 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor and the Nazis took power, Bonhoeffer was already in the thick of the struggle for the German church. He had been ordained, and pastored a small church in Berlin in addition to his academic duties; through his work with boys in that parish he became acquainted first-hand with the desperate plight of the working poor. He had become active in the international ecumenical movement, making contacts that he would later try to use on behalf of the resistance during the war. In the church itself, Bonhoeffer also became heavily involved in the

struggle against efforts by “German Christian” leaders in the church to turn it into an arm of the Nazi Party. Here Bonhoeffer’s insistence on the Church as God’s creation and gift, led him to oppose all efforts to adopt the Nazi ideology of “blood, land and race” as the basis for the Church. On March 1, 1933, about a month after Hitler’s becoming Chancellor, Bonhoeffer gave a radio address opposing the “Leadership Principle” (*der Führerprinzip*), but that broadcast was cut off by the Nazi government.

Later in 1933, Bonhoeffer took a leave from his lectureship at the University of Berlin to accept a pastoral call to serve two German-speaking congregations in London. He had deep inner conflicts about whether to accept this call, and faced fierce denunciations from his friend and mentor, Karl Barth, who thought he was abandoning the church struggle. In the spring of that year, the government had forbidden Christians of Jewish ancestry to have jobs in the state or the church, and Church leaders sympathetic to the government were moved into positions of authority. In September Bonhoeffer had worked with Martin Niemöller to found the Pastors’ Emergency League to oppose Nazi incursions and collaboration within the church: many joined Barth in thinking that this was no time for Bonhoeffer to go to England. While there, however, Bonhoeffer informed Christians, both German and English, about the situation in Germany, made friends with leaders in the Church of England (notably the Bishop of Chichester, George Bell), and continued work in the worldwide ecumenical movement. All of these contacts would be important later in Bonhoeffer’s work to bring down the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in the spring of 1935 to direct a new seminary founded by the Confessing Church, an outgrowth of the Pastors’ Emergency League. Because the Confessing Church had repudiated the official Reich Church and its leaders, all the Confessing pastors and their works were now illegal. Of course they could not earn salaries from the government; for the first time German clergy had to depend upon the gifts of the faithful for financial as well as emotional support. The seminary was set up in Finkenwalde on the Baltic, in far northern Germany, out of the way of church conflict if not quite out of sight. Here Bonhoeffer sought to establish not only a theological seminary, but a Christian community. The experiment lasted only two years before being closed by the Gestapo in September of 1937; Niemöller had been arrested that July.

Because of his membership in the Confessing Church, he lost his lecturing position in Berlin, and was deposed from his ministry by the state church. Friends in New York persuaded him to leave Germany for his own safety, so in June of 1939 he accepted a teaching position at Union.

Almost as soon as he set foot in America, however, Bonhoeffer realized that he had made a mistake. He regretted seeking his own safety while so many others were in danger or already suffering. He recognized that his call was to continue the struggle in Germany, but this time not only for the deliverance of his homeland from an evil power, but for the very future of Christianity in Germany and perhaps in the world. He was not given to self-indulgence or self-importance, but rather understood

that he must play whatever part he could in the momentous crisis confronting the world at that time. “This inactivity, or rather activity in unimportant things, is quite intolerable when one thinks of the brothers and of how precious time is,” he wrote in his journal.<sup>2</sup> To Reinhold Niebuhr he wrote: “Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security.”<sup>3</sup>(quoted by Bethge, p. 655).

Through his brother Klaus and his friend and brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi (father of the conductor Christoph von Dohnanyi), Bonhoeffer was drawn into the resistance movement within the military. His family had challenged his pacifism, arguing that he could not protect his own conscience at the expense of the suffering of others. Shortly after his return, Bonhoeffer began to work for the German military intelligence, the *Abwehr*, taking the job to avoid active military service and using its cover to continue his contacts with leaders abroad. Bonhoeffer traveled a good deal during the next few years, doing double duty as an agent of the state and of the resistance. He used his international contacts through the ecumenical movement and his ties to England to demonstrate to church leaders in the West that the “other Germany” existed, and that there were leaders opposed to Hitler, but these efforts came to nothing.

It was during those difficult years, however, that Bonhoeffer was “surprised by joy”: he fell in love with a young woman whose family had been his friends and supporters for years. Maria von Wedemeyer was only 18 when they met in 1942; Bonhoeffer was 36 and known to be in danger. In November 1942, when Bonhoeffer asked for Maria’s hand, her mother asked him not to see Maria for a year so she could “settle down.” The two were, however, allowed to write to each other; as things turned out, their entire courtship was carried on in letters and short visits in prison.

Hans von Dohnanyi, one of the chief leaders in various conspiracies against Hitler, recruited members and ran various circles of plotters. He also kept a “record of shame” documenting Nazi atrocities. In April 1943, after one assassination attempt had failed, these documents were discovered in his desk, and he, the Bonhoeffer brothers, and several others were arrested. Even from prison, they remained involved in further plots, the most famous being the last, on July 20, 1944. After surviving the bomb detonated in his conference room that day, Hitler vowed revenge. More than 5,000 people were executed after that explosion, including several hundred implicated in the July 20 plot. The attempts to secure the release of von Dohnanyi, the Bonhoeffers and the others failed, and they were transferred to higher-security prisons. On April 9, 1945 Hans von Dohnanyi was shot at Sachsenhausen, and Bonhoeffer and four other conspirators were hanged at Flossenbürg prison; Klaus and other plotters were executed two weeks later, on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The morning after his last trial, just before being taken out to the gallows, Bonhoeffer followed his daily habit of Bible reading and prayer, using the appointed readings for the day: he died as consistently as he had lived. Observers were struck by his confidence in prayer and his calm before his death.

In the years after Bonhoeffer's death, his friend and former student, Eberhard Bethge (who married Bonhoeffer's niece), collected his papers and began seeing them into print. Bishop Bell, Karl Barth, and others who had known Bonhoeffer began writing and speaking about him. Bonhoeffer's books began to appear in English translation, and by the early 1960's his reputation as an important theologian was established. Bethge began by collecting Bonhoeffer's notes, written in prison, for a new book on ethics; Bethge edited the fragments, finished some of the sections himself, and arranged them into a volume called *Ethics (Ethik)*, published in German in 1948 and in English in 1955. *The Cost of Discipleship (Nachfolge)*, written in 1935 as an extended meditation on the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' call to discipleship, first appeared in English in 1949. *Life Together (Gemeinsames Leben)*, which established the principles of community based on the Finkenwalde experiment and written in four weeks during 1938, appeared in English translation in 1952. Both of these works, published in German by Bonhoeffer well before his death, are finished studies that demonstrate his uncompromising adherence to Christ in the face of sharp attack from the surrounding culture and the powers of government seeking either to co-opt or conquer the church. *Letters and Papers from Prison (Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft)*, which Bethge collected after Bonhoeffer's death, first appeared in German in 1950 and in English in 1953; a revised and expanded edition appeared in 1970, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death. It is perhaps this volume that primarily brought Bonhoeffer's thought and work to a mass audience. The book was read widely in seminaries and university Christian fellowship groups. It showed how Bonhoeffer's theology was intricately bound up with his life and experience, and brought a human light to the sometimes stern tone of the earlier two books. More important, the book was fragmentary and loose, showing a mind still growing and reaching forward to the future.

The prison writings raised important questions about what discipleship might be like in a much more secular world that Bonhoeffer predicted to be coming after the war. Most famously, Bonhoeffer called for a "religionless Christianity," a cryptic phrase that has produced much discussion. In the context of his other works, this suggestion points, I think, to a time when Christians must live out their discipleship without the support of an established church (more critical for German or English Christians than for Americans), without the underpinnings of bourgeois culture, and perhaps even without the expression of traditional worship forms. Bonhoeffer wanted the Christian life to be seen in action, in practical decisions made in obedience to Christ for the sake of others, for Christ's will to be incarnated by his followers as fully as Christ himself incarnated the will of God.

Bonhoeffer remains, sixty years after his death, a seminal thinker and an important influence. His life and his work challenge an easy assumption of faith, a self-justification in the name of Jesus that gives the lie to the costly grace that Jesus actually offers. Bonhoeffer did not think it possible to "accept Christ" and then go blithely about our lives unchanged: he recognized, as he put it, that "when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Because Bonhoeffer recognized and accepted that call so literally in his own life and death, he challenges us to respond to Christ's call in our lives: to uncover the powers of the world that would distort or destroy true Christian life; to follow Christ into the service of others; and to "say yes" to the world in which Christ was incarnate and in which Christ calls us to follow him.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. & ed. Victoria J. Parnett, (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000, 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 652.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 655.

<sup>44</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, transl. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company Collier Books, 1963), 99.

# In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Footsteps: A Visit to Germany in 2005

by Heidi Stani-Wolski

May 9, 2005 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Nazi Germany. In Russia and Poland the day is commemorated as "Victory Day," and in Britain and Germany it is called "Liberation Day."

In April my husband and I were fortunate to spend some time in Germany. We visited two of the important places in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life, Berlin and Berlin-Dahlem, where I was doing some family research in the archives. We then continued on by car through the former East Germany to Weimar, the Bohemian Forest on the German-Czech border, and then on to Prague. After 60 years the scars of war and its aftermath are still much in evidence in these areas.

Our first stop was Berlin-Dahlem, a lovely suburb of Berlin proper. This was the place where Martin Niemöller established the Confessing Church and the Pastor's Emergency League. This church was founded as a direct counter to the state-sponsored church controlled by the Nazis. In consequence of Niemöller's outspoken opposition to Hitler, he was arrested on July 1, 1937 and sent to Dachau concentration camp. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also a member of the Confessing Church and later served as director of its seminary in Finkenwalde. Years later Niemöller delivered his oft-quoted indictment of the role of the church, and indeed all Germans, during the Nazi period:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.<sup>1</sup>

It was during this time of conflict, violence and upheaval that Bonhoeffer developed his theology. His writings address the essential questions of man's relationship to man and to God, the role of the church in the modern world as the Body of Christ, and Jesus's radical call to discipleship. He put forward a profound and costly Christian ethic, one that could sanction and even demand killing to prevent greater evil. Imprisoned and near the end of his life, Bonhoeffer wrote, "we are moving toward a completely religionless time."<sup>2</sup>

His writings are best understood within the context of his life and response to Nazi Germany.

Bonhoeffer saw evil as something concrete and tangible, embodied in the history and institutional crimes of his time and place. When he speaks of the moral agent with an ethical dilemma he is talking about the reality – starkly evident in his time as in ours – of harm, destruction or violence done to one's neighbor.

Bonhoeffer states that morally responsible men and women are called to counter evil with action. According to Bonhoeffer, we have been given two unerring criteria to determine what our response to evil should be: 1) the need of one's neighbor and 2) the model of Jesus of Nazareth. There can be no other guidepost, because according to Bonhoeffer we can have no other direct knowledge of good and evil. There is no moral certainty in the world beyond these two criteria. Based on these guides, we define and undertake action in response to a concrete moral dilemma in our life.<sup>3</sup> This type of action based on free will is a morally risky and even dangerous venture, given human fallibility. It requires faith, prayer and the rigorous examination of conscience, but it is precisely how we participate in the "reality of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Our first response to an inescapable moral dilemma may be to seek peace of mind or a return to the status quo, the way things were before the dilemma presented itself. We want to do the right thing and also resolve the conflict and tension. It is here that people of conscience may fall "prey to quick solutions, actions of convenience and deception. Because feeling good about themselves and their world is what matters ultimately. They fail completely to see that a bad conscience, that disappointment and frustration over one's action, may be a much healthier and stronger state for their souls to experience than peace of mind and feelings of well-being."<sup>5</sup>

Often we consider our motives or the hoped-for consequences of our actions when determining our behavior. But Bonhoeffer argues, "since neither motives nor consequences have a fixed stopping point, both are doomed to failure as moral criteria."<sup>6</sup> We seek universally valid and binding principles, both as guideposts for our behavior and as a necessity, to maneuver through and give structure to the society we live in. We want moral certainty or absolutism, but instead we find ourselves in unique situations. And in these unique situations, moral behavior cannot be reduced to general principles. "Reliance on theory, in other words is destructive to ethics, because it interferes with our ability to deal effectively with evil."<sup>7</sup> Being truly free means having the capacity to "ignore conscience, reputation, facts and anything else in order to make the best arrangement under the circumstances. This is the freedom to act in any way necessary, even to do what is wrong in order to avoid what is worse..."<sup>8</sup> The ultimate question for us is "not how to extricate ourselves from the affair but how the coming generation shall continue to live." Similarly, the church has a moral responsibility not to argue abstractly about social injustice or war. The church ought to say concretely, "Engage in this war," or "Do not engage in this war," and these words should be followed with actions.<sup>9</sup>

In the April 28, 2005 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Freeman Dyson describes the war-

time situation in the area of Germany that we found ourselves driving through this mid-April. In 1945 the British and American armies were pushing across the German frontier from the West and the Russians were coming in from the East. “The total of death and destruction and misery during those eight months was unequaled by any similar period in the long history of human misfortunes, wars and persecutions.” On the Eastern front, “brutality was the rule and the International Red Cross had no voice. Civilians were routinely raped and murdered and prisoners of war were starved.” When General Clay finally entered Berlin, he referred to it as the “city of the dead”.<sup>10</sup>

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When their flat in Berlin was damaged by bombing, my grandparents moved to their estate in Freyburg-an-der-Unstrutt (Thuringia). In April, we visited the remaining properties and buildings of this estate and talked to people who had lived with my grandparents there. When the American forces came, they made my grandfather, Kurt von Priesdorff, mayor of the town. I had always thought that this brief respite from the violence must have been a joyous time, if not a moment of relief. But in the Berlin archive I found a speech my grandfather made at the time and directed to the American occupying forces, and General Clay in particular. Sixty years later it seems more like the last gasp before the next calamitous event. He described the utter devastation of the cities; Berlin and Dresden reduced to waste, the streams of refugees, starvation, death, exhaustion and despair. “Do not give up on the Germans,” he pleads. “Remember the Germany of Goethe and Schiller. Remember the idealism of our forefathers. Remember what we tried to accomplish in Weimar. Let the Germans try to reach these ideals. Do not abandon Germany. The Germans will work hard so that you will not be disappointed.”<sup>11</sup> Soon thereafter, the American tanks pulled out of town and Red Army pulled in. One of the first things the Soviets did when they marched into town was to arrest my grandfather.

It is tempting for me to try to evaluate my grandfather’s life through the prism of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theology. An aristocrat by birth, my grandfather lost his mother early on. His father did not have time to raise children, so he was sent to be a page at the Kaiser’s court. He was an officer during WWI, but it seems he never left Berlin during the war. During the tumultuous Weimar years, he was responsible for trying to establish an internal security apparatus in Berlin to protect the struggling democracy from the assault from the left and right. When the Nazis were seizing control of Berlin, he was forced to go into hiding with his family of nine for almost two years. His struggle ended in failure and the total collapse of the government. He was an historian, who became a banned writer. During the Soviet occupation, it became a crime to own or sell any book he had written.

In the 1930’s my grandfather’s group of friends started thinking about how they could get rid of Hitler. Their motives were various but here, too, his friends failed. These friends were drawn from a group of like-minded aristocrats, who had been public servants all their lives and had very definite ideas about what Germany should be. They included many top-ranking officers, who had either refused to serve Hitler or had been dismissed by him when they disagreed with his policies. This

group looked to the English system of constitutional monarchy as a model for Germany to emulate. In the twenties, they made their first contacts with the British. By the thirties, they came to realize that British support was not only crucial as a model, but an absolute necessity for the survival of the Germany they envisioned.

From my research in the archive and reading private correspondence between my grandfather and his British friends, I have a better understanding of him as a person. But there are many details of his life that I still do not know. His friends the Generals Beck, von Moltke, and von Witzleben were executed by the Nazis for their involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler. But his close friend von Blomberg’s role is more ambiguous. After the July 20 conspiracy failed, over 1,500 people were arrested and 200 executed.

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After leaving Berlin, we drove to the small village of Freyburg-an-der-Unstrutt and visited the old villa where my grandfather spent his last years. From the balcony you still have a sublime view of the entire valley, extending to the northeast and south. When the Soviets took control of the village, my grandfather was arrested as a potential threat and served time in prison. His family was scattered as refugees or killed, his home destroyed and his remaining property seized. One eyewitness of the times expressed a widespread acceptance among Germans of the tragedy: “We didn’t get rid of Hitler, so we paid the price. We lost everything: our homes, our families, our hope for the future.”

But one thing that my grandfather did not lose was his belief in the power of ideas to change the world and his faith in friendships and people to carry out these changes. From his tiny village in East Germany, he maintained an active correspondence with his dear friend, James Dalton in England, discussing Goethe, Schiller, Lord Byron and Walter Scott. Changes, he believed, were only brought about by persons who struggle in this realm of ideas and ideals.

It is difficult to comprehend a lawless society, in which evil, terror and violence toward your fellow man is valued and carried out every day. In this upside-down world, anyone who does not fit in is seen as a potential threat to be eliminated. People fall into three categories in such a society: the perpetrators, the victims and the mute observers. There is a rarer fourth category, the person of conscience and will, who takes action to change this status quo.

We ended our trip in Prague visiting the Jewish Quarter. The Pinkas Shul synagogue is the second oldest in the ghetto, built in 1535. In the years after World War II, the interior has been turned into a memorial for almost 80,000 Jewish victims of the Holocaust, from Bohemia and Moravia. In the display case we read one of the many heart-rending messages written by one of the victims shortly after being sent to concentration camp: “Dear Sylvia, arrived here very sick. Have been taken to camp clinic. Hope you are doing well. P.S.: Uncle Slomov has died.” The handwriting is very large,

block letters, as though the writer was concentrating all his efforts and energies on sending a clear message that was very important to him. You can tell that his hand trembled as he wrote.

With these images and thoughts, and Bonhoeffer's call for bold action based on his theory of ethics, I think about these last 60 years. What is his challenge to us today in this age that combines relative comfort with a pervasive anxiety?

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This bibliography lists works cited and additional background reading used to understand my grandfather's time as a page at court in *Kaiserzeit*; to understand the role of the generals who were my grandfather's friends; and, to understand Hugh Dalton's role in the Ministry of Economic Warfare.

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**Heidi Stani-Wolski** and her husband Tom Dwyer have attended St. Andrew's since 1993. Heidi is currently serving as Secretary of the Vestry. She is a long-time volunteer with the Breakfast Program, has been its food coordinator, and is now a member of the board of that ministry. She has worked as a German translator for twenty years and has her own translation company.



### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Martin Niemöller, "Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten," poem attributed to Martin Niemöller, translation published in *Time Magazine*, April 28, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 279.

<sup>3</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, *Ethics*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 231.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Huff, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906-1945," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/b/bonhoff.htm> (2 May 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>7</sup> Huff, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 69.

<sup>9</sup> James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press: 1970), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Freeman Dyson, "The Bitter End," *New York Review of Books*, 52:7 (28 April 2005): 4

<sup>11</sup> Kurt von Priesdorff, Appeal to General Clay, trans. Kurt von Priesdorff, ms. in Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin-Dahlem.

# The Tortuous Way: Bonhoeffer's Return to Germany

by Michael A. Walters

A few years ago, while we were living in Hanover, NH, four weeks after I broke my leg playing softball, I was asked by some colleagues whether or not I was up to a short, relaxing, five-mile hike to the top of Mt. Ascutney in Vermont. Being an avid hiker, I took up their offer and we made the long, winding, steep climb through the pine forests to the windy summit. I hobbled gamely along the trail, stubbing my foot on logs, passing through the deep green humidity of the summer north woods, getting whacked by errant branches, being surprised by the playful calls of the nuthatch and the jay. It was a beautiful day for a walk, and the pace, rhythm, and late summer scenery made for a meditative experience. After several hours, we neared the top. As we rose over the crest of the rocky Monadnock, wounded but not undone, in the comfortable exhaustion of a lengthy walk, we encountered skipping children, and laughing adults seemingly not outfitted for a climb to the summit. I, at least, had forgotten that there was a road for cars to the top, an easy way up.

During another season of the church year, I have often arrived at Easter feeling somehow unfulfilled. Where did Lent go? In spite of my best intentions I find myself trying to play seasonal catch-up in Holy Week, trying to jump on the path to Good Friday at the last minute and not really being able to capture the complete wonderment of the Resurrection. Another Lent, with its time for sacred preparation, lost... I feel cheated and make a mental note to try again next year.

From these experiences, I have learned that it pays to participate. I have learned that it is not the end of the journey that is the most important goal, but more often the journey itself. Even though I know that there is a smooth path to the summit, it is life-giving and formative to experience the hike up through the woods. Even though I know that Christ is risen, the journey through Lent enriches the Easter experience.

In 1939 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was part of the swirling events that were carrying the world into what was to be the maelstrom we know as World War II. He had, along with others, created a Confessing Church that was counter to the state church of the Nazis. He was intimately involved in the training of pastors for that church at the seminary at Finkenwalde and used this experience to outline his tenets of Christian community in the book *Life Together*. He had published his masterful treatise *The Cost of Discipleship* in which he chided the state church for its doling out of cheap grace and

called all Christians to embrace the costly grace that is laid before us by discipleship with Jesus Christ. And now he was being called to the safety of the United States and to what his theologian friends at Union Theological Seminary believed would be his only safe haven from the gathering storm.

Ostensibly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer accepted their offers because of the chance to practice freely his calling as a theologian, in an academic atmosphere he had found invigorating almost a decade earlier when he had come to study at Union. This, coupled with the fear that he would have to answer the call to service in the army if he stayed in Germany, and risk embarrassing the Confessing Church by his assured refusal, led him to board the transatlantic ship on June 8, 1939. His journal from this trip makes one thing abundantly clear: he was questioning his own motivations in fleeing Germany even before he boarded the vessel.

He arrived in New York City on June 18. Two days later he wrote:

...through my intention and my interior necessity, continually to remember the brothers over there and their work, I have been almost abandoning my task over here. It would seem to me almost like disloyalty if my heart were not completely in Germany. I must find the right balance in this. Paul also writes that he is constantly present with his community in prayer, and yet he is able to devote himself entirely to the immediate task. That remains to be learnt. It will only be possible through prayer. May God give me in the next week a clear conviction about my future and maintain me in the fellowship of prayer with the brothers.<sup>1</sup>

As the weeks wore on in America, he continued to question his absence from Germany:

We cannot get away from it any more. Not because we are necessary, or because we are useful (to God?), but simply because that is where our life is, and because we leave our life behind, destroy it, if we cannot be in the midst of it again. It is nothing pious, more like some vital urge. But God acts not only by means of pious incentives, but also through such vital stimuli. 'Come before winter' (2 Timothy 4:21) - it is no misuse of scripture, if I accept that as having been said to me. If God gives me grace for it.<sup>2</sup>

Although he had been warmly welcomed in the United States and had many dear friends here, he quickly decided he must return to Germany. The renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a close associate of Bonhoeffer's, later called this decision the "finest logic of Christian martyrdom."<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer wrote to Niebuhr in July 1939:

I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in

Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people. My brothers in the Confessional Synod wanted me to go. They may have been right in urging me to do so, but I was wrong in going. Such a decision each man must make for himself. Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make this choice in security.<sup>4</sup>

Less than a month after he arrived in the United States, Dietrich Bonhoeffer returned to Germany. Why would anyone do such a thing? Why did Bonhoeffer return to Germany when it meant almost certain death for him? What called him to walk the tortuous path with other believers in Germany?

Part of his decision to return is linked, I believe, to the closeness of his relationships with the seminarians he was training to be pastors of the Confessional Church. Another facet that surely influenced his decision is his devotion and close tie to his family. However, I think another possibility worth contemplating was raised in a recent article comparing Dietrich Bonhoeffer with the recently deceased John Paul II. In this article, mathematician Charles Ford, a Bonhoeffer expert, is quoted as saying that he believes "Bonhoeffer returned from America because he did not want to miss his encounter with Jesus Christ, who was waiting to take form in his life."<sup>5</sup>

According to Ford, Bonhoeffer may have recognized his call to return as an opportunity to shape Christ's presence within himself by intentionally choosing to follow the more challenging path to what he saw as his own destiny. Rather than take the easy path, he realized that the revelation of Christ within him might only be accomplished by embracing the hard work at hand with his fellows and family. Bonhoeffer certainly recognized the joy and glory of the Resurrected Christ. "But if we would have a share in that glory and radiance," he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "we must first be conformed to the image of the Suffering Servant who was obedient to the death of the cross." Bonhoeffer saw this formation as a life-long progression "from knowledge to knowledge, from glory to glory, to an even closer conformity with the image of the Son of God."<sup>6</sup>

Bonhoeffer's choice to return to Germany was a fateful one that would lead to his death at the hands of the Nazis in 1945. I will probably not be called upon to make such a decision. But, in many ways, God's call to me is the same one that called Bonhoeffer home to Germany. I am called to listen attentively for directions to that path that will form Christ within me, walking with my eyes on the mountaintop, but also with an intentional involvement in the way I tread. For only in this intentionality is it possible that I may be able to experience the full joy of Christ's promise for me. The path may be rough and steep, the way may be tedious or truly dangerous, but, as Bonhoeffer wrote, "Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it."<sup>7</sup>

So may it be.

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**Michael Walters** and his wife, Stacy, attended St. Andrew's in the 1980's, and have recently returned after living in New Hampshire for a number of years. Their daughter attended Sunday School here as a young child, and their son was baptized by Father Alex Miller. Mike is active in the Men's Spirituality Group. He works for Pfizer as a medicinal chemist.

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### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 214.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Bosanquet, *Life and Death*, 217.

<sup>5</sup> Uwe Siemon-Netto, 6 April 2005, "Analysis: Bonhoeffer and Pope Parallels," *The Washington Times* (6 April 2005) <http://www.washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050406-034038-5890r.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 301-303.

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# On Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Suggestions for Further Reading

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*Love Letters from Cell 92: the Correspondence between Dietrich Bobhoeffer and Maria von Wedemeyer, 1943-45*. Ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz. Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1992.

*A Testament to Freedom: the Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F.Burton Nelson. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995.

In addition, there are compilations of writings on specific topics.

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