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## BONHOEFFER AND NON-VIOLENCE

### Introduction

Was Bonhoeffer a pacifist on theological grounds? Yes. Did he condone Hitler's assassination on theological grounds? Yes again. Understandably (but perhaps regrettably) this apparent contradiction is what interests most people when discussing Bonhoeffer's pacifism. There are two obvious ways of resolving this contradiction. The first would be to claim that Bonhoeffer was an absolute pacifist, who was not really involved in the plots to kill Hitler and who never actually sanctioned his assassination. This suggestion is offered in a recent book, whose authors claim that "There is no evidence that Bonhoeffer was involved in the plots to kill Hitler," and that there is no "real evidence that Bonhoeffer himself affirmed the killing of Hitler."<sup>1</sup>

The second solution to this apparent paradox would be to argue that Bonhoeffer, forced by political circumstances, had to give up his earlier pacifism for more "realistic" theological ethics which allowed for violence under extreme circumstances. According to this view, Bonhoeffer abandoned the Gospel's demand for peace to embrace Reinhold Niebuhr's "critical" or "Christian realism."<sup>2</sup> Both solutions are

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1 Mark Nation, Anthony Siegrist, and Daniel Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 93.

2 Charles Marsh thus opposes Bonhoeffer's earlier "quietist" *imitatio Christi* in the vein of Thomas à Kempis, as expounded in *Nachfolge* with his later adoption of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism (Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 315). Christian realism is Niebuhr's notion that in the light of human sinfulness and the ambiguities of political realities, Christian political action must proceed from a cal-

problematic, because they do not do justice to historical fact, nor to the continuity of Bonhoeffer's thought.<sup>3</sup> Trying to prove that Bonhoeffer rejected violence simply runs up against the historical evidence that Bonhoeffer did indeed sanction violence as being necessary to stop Hitler. Similarly, the attempt to show that Bonhoeffer abandoned a pietistic, non-political discipleship in *Nachfolge* for the sake of a more realist political program later in life compels us to misread that book as a manual for otherworldly Saints, and to overlook the continuity of Bonhoeffer's theology in accordance with his abiding Christological interpretation of reality.

A better way to deal with the apparent contradiction between Bonhoeffer's pacifism and his affirmation of tyrannicide (without affirming tyrannicide as an ethical-political principle) would be to approach the issue in the light of his Christological peace ethic, which remains consistent and deepens with this idea of "realistic responsibility." Before we talk about Bonhoeffer's Christologically based peace ethic, however, we need to assess briefly the current debate about the nature of his involvement in the conspiracy.

### Bonhoeffer's Role in the Conspiracy

In his biography of Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge claims that roughly from 1940 on, Bonhoeffer was convinced that killing Hitler was necessary for the success of the conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> In their book *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, Mark Thiessen Nation, Anthony Siegrist, and Daniel Umbel set out to discredit precisely what Eberhard Bethge asserted. These authors deny Bonhoeffer's active involvement in the resistance, as well as his public affirmation of Hitler's assassination, going so far as to assert that "there is not a shred of evidence that Bonhoeffer was linked in any way to these attempts on Hitler's life."<sup>5</sup>

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culated compromise to obtain the most realistic results. From a Bonhoefferian perspective, this notion fails to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously (reading it as an impossible demand for perfection), and thus also regards the theory of a just war as a political principle, making pacifism defined as non-violence an impossible Christian default position.

3 Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel cite Larry Rasmussen's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* as the most influential study in arguing that "Bonhoeffer found himself unable to sustain his pacifism in the midst of conspiratorial involvement implicating him in the use of force, and as a result found it necessary to jettison his pacifist convictions in favor of a more realistic calculus" (*Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 162). A close reading of Rasmussen's book, however, proves their judgment to be rather unfair. Rasmussen argues that Bonhoeffer "modified" rather than abandoned his conviction of non-violence: "Politically, resistance against Hitler and the quest for 'peace, and social justice, or actually Christ' continues unabated throughout the thirties and forties. Seen in line with its broad theological and political contours, Bonhoeffer's was indeed an unbroken course." Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 126.

4 Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Biographie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 754, (translation mine). "Bonhoeffer was already totally geared towards the one precondition for peace, a condition that could not be a matter of negotiation for the church committees in Germany: the elimination of Hitler." See also page 848: "And Bonhoeffer, who knew something about not staying the hand of God's judgment, had already pleaded for the necessity of the assassination."

5 Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 86.

It is one thing to affirm that Bonhoeffer's role in the attempt to overthrow Hitler was negligible—it is quite another to deny completely Bonhoeffer's knowledge and approval of assassination attempts. As Victoria Barnett has already pointed out in her review of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, "there is substantial evidence to support Bethge's version of things, both in the later accounts of people who knew Bonhoeffer, and most particularly in Winfried Meyer's recent studies of Hans von Dohnanyi and the *Abwehr* resistance circles, as well as in Marijke Smid's study of Hans and Christine von Dohnanyi."<sup>6</sup> Had the authors of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* consulted these important historical studies, what would they have found?

Marijke Smid's study of Hans von Dohnanyi and his wife Christine, Bonhoeffer's older sister, relies heavily on Christine's diary, and its entries allow Smid to conclude that "Dietrich also supported and shared Dohnanyi's decision, to work for [...] the assassination of Hitler to trigger the overthrow [of Hitler's government]."<sup>7</sup> The Bonhoeffer family as a whole—but particularly Hans, Christine and Dietrich—often discussed the assassination. Smid also confirms Bethge's claim that, from 1939 on, Bonhoeffer was well aware of the fact that violence would be unavoidable if the Nazi regime were to be overthrown. She concludes: "the will to the overthrow was borne conjointly from September 1939 onward not only by Hans von Dohnanyi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but also by the entire Bonhoeffer family with all its members, including the women."<sup>8</sup>

Winfried Meyer's detailed analysis of *Unternehmen Sieben* (Operation 'Seven'), an attempt spearheaded by Hans von Dohnanyi to transport fourteen Jews to safety in Switzerland,<sup>9</sup> shows that Bonhoeffer's role as a "spy" was risky and dangerous. It also shows that Bonhoeffer was not merely a messenger for the resistance but that he himself was deeply informed and interested in ending Hitler's regime by any means possible. According to Meyer, it was Dohnanyi who radically minimized Bonhoeffer's role in the conspiracy and in the rescuing the Jews, in order to protect his brother-in-law.<sup>10</sup> We also know from other sources that Bonhoeffer actually disagreed with fellow resister James von Moltke regarding the assassination. Both men were "radical enemies of the Nazi regime, both profoundly devout

6 Victoria Barnett, "Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Post-Bethge," *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 20.3 (15 September 2014), <<https://contemporarychurchhistory.org/2014/09/interpreting-bonhoeffer-post-bethge/>> [accessed 21 October 2015].

7 Marijke Smid, *Hans von Dohnanyi, Christine Bonhoeffer: Eine Ehe im Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 320.

8 *Ibid.*, 332. In Smid's portrayal, Bonhoeffer, his sister Christine and her husband are a central 'trio' in the constant discussions of the plot to assassinate Hitler and overthrow his government.

9 Many popular accounts of this affair report that, indeed, seven persons were rescued, while the documents show the number to be fourteen. See Winfried Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben: Eine Rettungsaktion für vom Holocaust Bedrohte aus dem Amt Ausland/Abwehr im Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Frankfurt: Hain, 1993), 3.

10 *Ibid.*, 394.

Christians, both working for the *Abwehr*," but they were separated "by their disagreement about the need to kill Hitler, which Moltke opposed but Bonhoeffer had come to believe was necessary."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we also have the report of Bonhoeffer's former student, Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, about Bonhoeffer's reaction to a young officer's question about whether it was morally defensible to kill Hitler. The young officer, Werner von Haeften (1908–1944), had frequent access to Hitler and asked Bonhoeffer whether he should shoot Hitler if the opportunity arose. Bonhoeffer responded by first trying to find out whether one so young did indeed have this kind of clearance and access to the *Führer*.<sup>12</sup> Haeften, who was a sincere Christian, convinced him that this was indeed the case, and questioned Bonhoeffer in a four-hour long discussion about the moral propriety of violating his oath of allegiance to Hitler, and the moral obligation of making use of his rare access to Hitler in order to shoot him. Would he not incur guilt for not making use of such opportunity? "Should I? May I," were his pressing questions.<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer's answer indicates his clear understanding of how agonizingly difficult resistance work was for a conscientious Christian. He told Haeften that the existential moral dilemma of "shooting or not" is merely one part of the larger question of whether shooting Hitler will actually help change the political situation. Removing Hitler in itself is unhelpful; indeed, the situation could even become worse following his death. Bonhoeffer explained that the work of resistance is so difficult, precisely because what comes after Hitler's death needs to be very carefully planned. After the assassination, an alternative governing body would have to be in place which could effectively exercise power. Haeften, probably (and understandably) preoccupied with his own existential struggle, found this response too theoretical. He saw a chance to act, and wanted to know whether he should seize this moment. Bonhoeffer, however, cautioned him to look past his own personal predicament and soberly consider all the possible complications of such an action. To Haeften's preoccupation with the possible guilt incurred for not taking this opportunity, Bonhoeffer answered that seizing such an opportunity precipitously, and thus irresponsibly, would incur just as much guilt. In fact, he said, there is no possible scenario that would allow the Christian to remain without guilt.<sup>14</sup>

11 Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Richard Stern, *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi* (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 97.

12 Bonhoeffer knew his brother (Hans Bernd von Haeften, who was part of the Kreisau Circle) quite well and both Hans Bernd and Werner were executed for their role in the conspiracy.

13 Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihn Bruder. Bonhoeffer: Einblicke in ein hoffnungsvolles Leben* (Berlin: Wichern Verlag, 2005), 101.

14 *Ibid.*, 112.

In this case, Bonhoeffer was making more than a merely utilitarian argument. He tried to convey to the young officer that the ethical question of tyrannicide was not merely an individual, existential decision, but was bound up with a concrete political situation for all involved. To the moral question of killing Hitler, Bonhoeffer responded entirely in line with his argument for responsible action in *Ethics*: Such an exceptional action lies beyond ethical justification, and must be conducted with a willingness to incur guilt, but this guilt is surrendered to Christ who is a merciful judge.<sup>15</sup> On a purely political level, Bonhoeffer understood and condoned the necessity of killing Hitler; but he wanted to make sure that an assassination would succeed in toppling the government. Bonhoeffer's reasoning in this matter was exactly in line with that of Hans von Dohnanyi, Canaris and Oster, which also explains why assassination attempts were often called off when key generals withdrew their support at short notice because Hitler had, once again, scored an unexpected military success. When the often self-serving withdrawal of support by senior army leaders made the ultimate goal of Hitler's death—and the end of the Nazi regime—impossible, the conspirators waited for a more opportune moment to effect a change in government. Killing Hitler and other leading Nazis was never a goal in itself.

In short, the entire historical context, which is shaped with the aid of anecdotal and serious historical sources, demonstrates that Bonhoeffer knew about and approved of Hitler's assassination, and therefore of using violence to end both the war and Nazi rule. Stanley Hauerwas's assertion that there is "no indication in Bonhoeffer's life or work that he ever abandoned his pacifism to join a plot to kill Hitler," cannot be maintained in light of what we know. Of course, as Sabine Dramm makes clear in her book *V-Mann Gottes und der Abwehr?*,<sup>16</sup> one has to define what precisely is meant when we say Bonhoeffer did or did not join a plot. Moreover, we certainly have little evidence that Bonhoeffer was involved with the practical details of political conspiracy. He did not handle explosives, for example. Nonetheless, Eberhard Bethge rightly calls Bonhoeffer's involvement "Mittäterschaft am Komplott gegen Hitler,"<sup>17</sup> indicating some form of active participation.<sup>18</sup> He was more than a messenger boy, and much more than a sensitive counsellor to fellow conspirators who helped them justify their actions according to their own worldview.<sup>19</sup>

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15 Ibid.

16 Sabine Dramm, *V-Mann Gottes und der Abwehr? Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der Widerstand* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005).

17 *Mittääter* describes an accomplice, someone who is actively implicated in a deed or action.

18 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 812.

19 This is the interpretation of Bonhoeffer's role by the authors of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* See page 92.

It is indeed quite probable, as Dramm claims, that Bonhoeffer's active participation in the conspiracy by joining the *Abwehr* was primarily to escape military service, and thus to maintain his personal conviction of conscientious objection to carrying arms.<sup>20</sup> A number of other motivations may also have been a factor. Bonhoeffer had long shared his family's dislike of Hitler's policy. He could no longer write, teach, or train seminarians, and was thus condemned to uselessness. During the time he hoped for release from prison, Bonhoeffer mused about the possibility of joining Bethge's regiment as a fellow soldier. In one of his uncensored letters Bonhoeffer writes: "My sense is that I will be released – and that would mean immediate induction into military service – in January or February. If where you are stationed you are able (and want) to do something so that I might go there too, please don't let others' advice deter you from this. The only question is whether you have someone there with whom you can speak confidentially."<sup>21</sup> We know from his letters that Bonhoeffer himself preferred medical service or a military chaplaincy. He had put in for one himself at the beginning of the war in 1939,<sup>22</sup> and urged Bethge from prison to try for the same position.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the desire to join Bethge's unit is simply an expression of solidarity, but if Bonhoeffer had freedom of speech in this letter, and if refusing military service had been an absolute condition for him, why did he not mention anything of this sort? Moreover, Bonhoeffer reportedly prayed for the defeat of Germany and also approved of the decision by military leaders to betray army movements to the allies in order to hasten Germany's defeat; he did so fully knowing that such betrayal would hurt German troops.<sup>24</sup>

All of this means that the recent attempt to rewrite this historical context by turning Bonhoeffer into an uncompromising pacifist lacks plausibility. From what we have seen, the historical sources we now have affirm that Bonhoeffer did indeed see Hitler's assassination and other leading Nazis as the only way to end the war and preserve what was left of German culture for the next generation. While their historical argument does not hold water, the authors of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, nonetheless contribute (inadvertently) an essential point to our understand-

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20 The authors of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* rely almost exclusively on Sabine Dramm's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) for this claim (see Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 225). Somewhat incredibly, the authors also claim that Bonhoeffer's final charge boiled down to using his *Abwehr* status to refuse bearing arms (*ibid.*, 226; incidentally, a crime itself meriting the death penalty). As Bonhoeffer's own letters to Bethge make clear (in addition to the material provided by Christine von Dohnanyi and others), this charge was the 'happy' result of Bonhoeffer's and Hans von Dohnanyi's dissembling and successfully diverting the prosecutor Manfred Roeder from Bonhoeffer's promoting Hitler's overthrow and thus national treason.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:326.

22 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*, DBWE 15:269–270.

23 DBWE 8:315, 368, 380, 399.

24 Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 759.

ing of Bonhoeffer. All too often, Bonhoeffer is read as if his whole life led up to his decision to work for the conspiracy, and as if his decision to concede to political violence as the last resort was the hermeneutical key to his Christian outlook and theology. No doubt Bonhoeffer's theology *was* shaped by his political situation, but Mark Nation and his co-authors have reminded us that Bonhoeffer the theologian is much more interesting than Bonhoeffer the conspirator.

### Bonhoeffer's Theological Development

Given the historical evidence, debating whether Bonhoeffer condoned Hitler's assassination is a red herring that distracts attention from a more interesting question: whether Bonhoeffer had *theological* grounds for doing so. Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel are right to contest any interpretations that claim Bonhoeffer turned from a pacifist and theologian into a political resistance fighter who had come to realise the need for violence. But how many serious Bonhoeffer scholars have actually read Bonhoeffer in this way? The book sets out to show that Bonhoeffer had no part in the resistance, and never "attempted ethically to justify such attempts."<sup>25</sup> Presumably, this means that Bonhoeffer remained a pacifist from beginning to end. The word "justify" is of crucial importance in this context, because by this term the authors mean to capture exactly those interpretations that would have Bonhoeffer abandon his obedience to God's command for peace, and embrace the necessity for violence in politics as a principle. Yet virtually none of the authors they accuse of such readings (i.e. Bethge, Schlingensiepen, Rasmussen) actually read Bonhoeffer in this way.

Moreover, Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel connect this false turn from theologian to political resister with an equally problematic change in Bonhoeffer's theology. Instead, they postulate that Bonhoeffer's theology should be read as a continuous development. Such a reading, they argue, shows that Bonhoeffer's theological writings do, in fact, provide an "ethical foundation for resistance," but that such resistance must be "in line with the commandments of God known in Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup> Yet they do not, in the end, specifically show what this kind of resistance would look like. Instead, the book ends on a modified view of pacifism, akin to what Clifford Green has felicitously termed "Bonhoeffer's Peace Ethic." This term acknowledges that Bonhoeffer saw peace as God's central command to the church and thus to the world. As Green summarized Bonhoeffer's position, "[peace ethic] is a Christian, theological commitment; it is central to – and inseparable from – his understanding of the gospel; it is based on his distinctive way of reading the Bible,

<sup>25</sup> Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

especially the Sermon on the Mount; it is intrinsic to his discipleship, to his faith in Christ: it is essential to his theology of the church."<sup>27</sup> Green also argues for continuity within Bonhoeffer's theological development and claims that his participation in the plot to kill Hitler did not diminish or undermine his commitment to pacifism. One has to wonder why these authors do not simply agree with Green.

One possible reason for the authors' attempt to turn Bonhoeffer into a Menonite, Yoderian pacifist may be the dread that any other reading could lead to the ethical justification of violence *as a principle* in certain political circumstances. Once again, these authors are setting up a straw man, as far as most Bonhoeffer scholars are concerned. The following paragraphs aim to show that Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel's position is much closer to the majority of Bonhoeffer interpreters on this matter than they themselves believe.

The authors are correct in claiming that how such ethics of resistance appear has to be ascertained from Bonhoeffer's work as a whole, viewed as a continuous theological development. They rightly reject a supposed break between Bonhoeffer's early, more pietistic, theology and his later more realist, and politically activist theology. They are wrong, however, to attribute this latter view to Bethge,<sup>28</sup> and it is not clear how their own reading of Bonhoeffer provides a radically new interpretation of his work.<sup>29</sup>

The authors of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* rightly assert that Bonhoeffer's concept of realistic responsibility in the freedom of Christ and the acceptance of guilt for one's decisions do not "mark a radical shift in his thought," but must be "understood as extensions of Bonhoeffer's ethic of formation in Christ."<sup>30</sup> Yet, at the end of the book, one is left wondering whether this finding constitutes a radically new insight. Aside from the authors' trenchant and well-argued critique of the Niebuhrian reading of a break between the early pietistic and later critical realist Bonhoeffer, the authors merely restate a unified interpretation of Bonhoeffer that many scholars asserted long ago.

The main developmental lines run as follows: Bonhoeffer starts out from a classic 19<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran position that divides the world into spiritual and political

27 Clifford Green, "Pacifism and Tyrannicide: Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 18.3 (2005), 31–47, 40.

28 Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 94. The authors take Bethge's claim that by his involvement in the conspiracy Bonhoeffer truly became a man for his times in indicating such a break. However, Bethge—both in his biography and in his later reflections on this matter—roots Bonhoeffer's active involvement and sanctioning of tyrannicide (but not as a fixed political principle) in his friend's Christology as an act of faith-based, responsible action in freedom before God. See Eberhard Bethge, *Am gegebenen Ort. Aufsätze und Reden* (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1979), 61.

29 In fact, it is somewhat ironic that after their careful delineation of Bonhoeffer's theological development from his initial just-war theory to pacifism, they more or less end up exactly where Bethge himself landed already almost thirty years earlier.

30 Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*, 220.



spheres, and thus into Christian and more broadly human ethics.<sup>31</sup> This division stresses the God-given, eschatological nature of peace to such a degree that human responsibility to work for peace in society is minimized. Peace is a divine, not human, possibility and thus primarily a matter of faith or internal disposition—more a spiritual than a concrete political matter. For example, according to this view, Christ’s command to forsake riches and follow him speaks of the cultivation of an inner disposition which resists the love of money, rather than a demand to actually part with it. This cheap grace also applies to peace-making. Indeed, the early Bonhoeffer himself approves this view, when he argues that the pursuit of political peace too easily becomes an excuse for our sinful nature to implement self-centered political ideologies.<sup>32</sup> In addition, this neo-Lutheran teaching advocates a just war theory, based on divine orders of creation, of which nationality is one. The early Bonhoeffer echoes this teaching when he preaches: “God gave me to my mother, to my people” and thus “love for my people will sanctify murder, will sanctify war [...]. God calls the nation to war and victory.”<sup>33</sup>

Between 1930 and 1931, Bonhoeffer radically changes these views, in part through the influence of Jean Lasserre (1908–1983), a French Reformed pacifist theologian, whom he met during his stint in New York at the Union Theological Seminary (1930–1931). For Bonhoeffer, the work of peace is now God’s concrete command to Christians. He tells his audience at a youth conference in 1932: “The order of international peace today is God’s command to us. This is the specific expression of God’s will for our time.”<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer’s pacifism was fully matured in 1934, at an international ecumenical conference in Fano, Denmark. He rejected the argument that war was necessary to ensure peace, on the grounds that this logic mistakes security for peace and belittles the evil of war. In his address to the delegates, Bonhoeffer reveals his mature, Christological foundation for peace: In Christ, God has reconciled the world. Through the Church, Christ is present in the world. Hence “The church of Christ takes the weapons from her sons’ hands and forbids war to them.” To do otherwise is to become guilty of war and violence.<sup>35</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s turn to pacifism coincides with his new interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, against the grain of Lutheran theology. Rather than spiritualizing the ethical demands of the beatitudes, Bonhoeffer insists that “the Sermon

31 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika 1928–1931*, DBW 10:328 (all translations from the German edition when cited first are my own). See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928–1931*, DBWE 10:364.

32 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, DBW 12:233. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, DBWE 12:261.

33 DBW 10:337–339. See DBWE 10:371–373.

34 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ökumene, Universität, Pfarramt 1931–1932*, DBW 11:338. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932*, DBWE 11:364.

35 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London 1933–1935* (1997), DBW 13:299–301.

on the Mount exists for the purpose of doing it."<sup>36</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are called the children of God," meant that Christ's followers were actually to implement peace. Moreover, in Christ himself God has made peace with the world. Christ *is* peace and the Christian's participation in Christ, his/her being shaped into Christ-likeness, requires of us specific peace work in a public and political sense. But peace work must be done without violence, for "the meek shall inherit the earth." To be a Christian meant to live for peace and to renounce violence. At this stage, Bonhoeffer was willing to refuse bearing arms, which would have meant his death under martial law in Germany.

Should we then propose a final stage of theological development in which Bonhoeffer gave up, modified his pacifism and conceded the need for violence as part of being a Christian? The answer to this question is admittedly complicated. A simplified answer is that Bonhoeffer stuck to his pacifism, but had to correlate his pacifist conviction with his strong sense of civic responsibility, which was equally anchored in Christ. As Clifford Green put it, "Certainly, non-violence was Bonhoeffer's default position. But his Christian peace ethic cannot be reduced to the thin principle of non-violence; rather it is defined by his thick commitment of faith in Christ with its manifold theological and ethical implications."<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer's student Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann recalls from many personal conversations, that "Bonhoeffer's positions were always variable; for him nothing was ever final, except the person and work of Jesus Christ [...]. Bonhoeffer over time became a 'practical theologian,' who obtained his own secularity entirely from the person of Jesus Christ."<sup>38</sup>

This longstanding interpretation of Bonhoeffer represents his political engagement as an extension, or deepening, of his already established Christology: God reveals himself in his becoming human in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to himself. Therefore theology has to think of God and the world together. This fundamental axiom of Bonhoeffer's makes Christology the *cantus firmus* running through all the variations of his theology. A quick survey of major Bonhoeffer commentators shows that most understand his turn to the so-called prison theology, including his work for the resistance and his notions of religionless Christianity and a 'world come of age,' as the prolongation of his Christology. Even early Bonhoeffer interpreters, who did not have access to all of Bonhoeffer's works, perceived a unifying centre that holds seemingly discontinuous developments in his theology together. For example, Gerhard Ebeling, who drew attention to the theo-

<sup>36</sup> Die Bergpredigt ist dafür da, daß sie getant wird." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, DBW 6:329. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE 6:326.

<sup>37</sup> Green, "Pacifism and Tyrannicide," 47.

<sup>38</sup> Zimmermann, *Wir nannten ihm Bruder Bonhoeffer*, 100.

logical differences between *Nachfolge* and Bonhoeffer's this-worldly interpretation of Christianity in the prison letters, suggested a search for the fundamental impulse (*Grundimpuls*) that required and made possible this development.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, Winfried Maechler, one of Bonhoeffer's seminarians, argued in 1954 that

Bonhoeffer never relinquished the central importance of the Sermon on the Mount for Christian ethics [...]. The form of Jesus Christ, and his taking form among humanity, is for him the central point of the Sermon on the Mount. For this reason, Bonhoeffer was indeed (if not an absolute) an uncompromising pacifist, a strong, relative pacifist, because he saw the striving for peace and the denial of violence as one of the main characteristics of Christianity.<sup>40</sup>

The one great exception to this unified interpretation of Bonhoeffer was Hanfried Müller, whose distinction between Bonhoeffer's early and late theology was quite influential, but this was corrected ten years later by Ernst Feil's important comprehensive Bonhoeffer interpretation (*Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers: Hermeneutik – Theologie – Weltverständnis*, 1970). In this seminal interpretation of Bonhoeffer's concept of the world (*Weltverständnis*), and thus his theology as a whole, Feil noted that "the theology of Bonhoeffer forms a continuous unity."<sup>41</sup> In his careful analysis, Feil shows clearly how the Christological center of Bonhoeffer's theology unifies his works from *Act and Being* to *Ethics* and the prison theology.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for Feil, not only Bonhoeffer's pacifism but also his decision to participate in the conspiracy against Hitler follow from the same Christological center and should not be opposed. Bonhoeffer, concludes Feil, "did not advocate pacifism as a matter of principle but, as one might say, [he advocated] a pragmatic pacifism, which permitted certain actions by those who were forced to commit violence for the sake of restoring a fundamentally betrayed justice, *without thereby negating his decisive pacifism.*"<sup>43</sup>

Another ten years after Feil, Eberhard Bethge himself described Bonhoeffer's agreement with the violent means to overthrow Hitler for the sake of peace as an exceptional act of responsibility out of a unified, Christ-centered theology:

With this ethic of responsibility, Bonhoeffer overcame the deadly separation of the two kingdoms without, however, simply identifying them. This ethic was the further deve-

<sup>39</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Die 'nicht-religiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe,'" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Die mündige Welt II*, vol. 2: *Verschiedenes* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1956), 301.

<sup>40</sup> Winfried Maechler, "Vom Pazifisten zum Widerstandskämpfer," in *Die mündige Welt III*, vol. 3 (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1960), 92.

<sup>41</sup> Ernst Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers: Hermeneutik – Christologie – Weltverständnis*, 5th edition (Berlin: LIT Verlag Berlin, 2005), 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 214ff.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 409, translation and emphasis mine. The German "kein prinzipieller Pazifismus" is difficult to translate and is perhaps best rendered "absolute" or "ideal" pacifism.

lopment of the concerns he already had in his youth, now fleshed out by his very own Christian and political experiences. Responsibility denies any absolute separation into worldly and spiritual elements, but dwells in both realms before God and before men. And in this ethic, Bonhoeffer himself lived out of the personal relation to Christ he maintained until the end, and which he also maintained in his daring of the conspiratorial political resistance. Thus, this political resistance is for him a response to his encounter of Christ, as it is also a response to the appeal from the suffering children of God in his day. This response places him beyond authoritarian laws and autonomous privacy. The one who responds takes on tasks others have failed to tackle or complete. The responding one does not try to avoid reality by means of unchangeable Christian principles. He steps into the context of contemporary human guilt, leaves justification to his God and accepts the consequences.<sup>44</sup>

We have to keep in mind that for Bonhoeffer the Christian life is all about the “becoming real” of Christ’s reality in this world, and this one “Christ-Reality” is the reconciliation of the world and God.<sup>45</sup> Therefore Christians have to *make* peace and peace is only possible within this world through concrete social and political measures. Bonhoeffer liked to say that “peace must be dared,” not merely believed in. For Bonhoeffer, treason (letting the enemy know German troop movements) and even tyrannicide were necessary in the light of the concrete situation in Germany to contribute to the possibility of peace in a concrete fashion. He knew that peace required political structures, and he had outlined such structures with the God-given political mandates in *Ethics*. Both church and civic institutions had failed to preserve social order. Now responsibility as a Christian peace worker required desperate action, with the long-term goal of stabilizing society after Hitler. Bonhoeffer, we recall, took part in several ‘circles’ that planned the post-war Germany, and certainly never relinquished this long-range and responsible view of the future.

Bonhoeffer thus followed a Christological, situational peace ethic of “realistic-responsibility,” which meant working out the peace accomplished in Christ within political realities. Violence was not a principle to employ in these matters, but precisely an act of free responsibility before God. Following Christ’s own example, such responsibility entailed vicarious suffering for the good of others; in this case it meant stopping more Jews, soldiers and civilians from being killed daily under Hitler’s barbaric and irrational politics, and ensuring peace for the coming generation.<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer had already risked his life by joining the conspiracy. But he was also willing to risk sinning by killing in order to make peace possible. It is important not to see in this decision any kind of *principle* that allows us to justify violence

<sup>44</sup> Eberhardt Bethge, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die theologische Begründung seines politischen Widerstandes,” in Bethge, *Am gegebenen Ort*, 61, translation mine.

<sup>45</sup> DBW 6:40–44. See DBWE 6:55–59.

<sup>46</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, DBW 8:25.

or war. Bonhoeffer classified participation in a political putsch as *ultima ratio*, as an irrational, unique act, “justifiable by neither rule nor law,” a concrete personal decision to be drawn into the reality of Christ and world.<sup>47</sup>

What then is the answer to the paradox of Bonhoeffer the pacifist and Bonhoeffer the “assassin”? At least part of the answer is that this very means of phrasing the problem is misleading. As Sabine Dramm has shown, and as Nation, Siegrid, and Umbel themselves argue, the role of assassin was never actually contemplated by anyone in the resistance. By using this designation provocatively as a book title, the authors frame their argument within a false dichotomy of pacifism versus violence, rather than starting with Bonhoeffer’s own conception of Christian ethics. For Bonhoeffer, ethics always involves following Jesus and hence is not a program, not even an ideal program, of pacifism. Bonhoeffer thought that following Christ and taking seriously his political responsibility as a Christian in Germany even required breaking the divine law of taking another’s life. The fragments of his final work *Ethics* show: a) that Bonhoeffer continued to believe that following Jesus into the realities of life is more important than any moral code; following Jesus means to work for peace and reconciliation; and b) that the emergency situation in Germany required unprecedented measures, tyrannicide and the overthrow of an illegitimate government in order to bring peace.

### Conclusion

Bonhoeffer knew that following Christ concretely into the messy business of life meant getting dirty – that is, it meant incurring offenses and guilt. Bonhoeffer was certain that he was following Christ, and he was willing to incur judgment for breaking human and divine laws, and, following the apostle Paul’s dictum that “I am judged by no-one but by Christ” (see 1 Cor. 4:3–4), to surrender himself to God’s mercy. We dare not forget Bonhoeffer’s conviction that killing Hitler meant indeed committing murder, for which one would become guilty before God. For this reason, Bonhoeffer never speaks of ‘a sanctified murder.’<sup>48</sup> From beginning to end, Christology, discipleship, and the church’s mission as the embodiment of God’s new humanity marked by its labors for peace determined Bonhoeffer’s ethics. His stated recognition of the necessity to kill Hitler is congruent with this view insofar as his consent to political violence is precisely not the sanctioning of a principle but rather a personal act of free responsibility for the sake of others. This action is theologically grounded in Bonhoeffer’s relation to Christ and God’s concrete

47 DBWE 6:273.

48 Schlingensiepen uses this language in his biography, attributing it (I think) to James Moltke, who rejected the assassination as immoral. Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 286.

command to work for peace, but for this very reason it is not a theological or ethical justification of the use of violence. Eberhard Bethge has perhaps put it best:

The origin of action does not lie in a theology. Theology can do either: block the path to a deed or prepare it. The political act of the Christian springs from a situation of responsibility rooted in faith. Something like the sensibility of faith to a particular situation frees the Christian to the act of resistance.<sup>49</sup>

Bethge makes it very clear, however, that such an act is *not* the execution of a previously conceived theological-ethical concept. For “such an execution still seeks the guard-rail of a prior or subsequent justification, which, however, must be left to God alone. Faith, by contrast, under the concrete situational demand of responsibility, takes hold of a piece of freedom for itself and others, wherefore faith does not procure its own justification, not even a theological one.”<sup>50</sup> We can see that for Bethge, as for Green and other Bonhoeffer scholars, the claim that Christology provides the explanatory framework for Bonhoeffer’s action in no way entails an attempt to theologically justify his involvement in the use of political violence. Bethge is entirely right to caution, “who are we—theologians, congregations, church-leaders, ethicists and contemporaries? What gives us the right to call a living deed before our judgment seat?” In some ways it is we whose motives are called into question when we seek to rationalize Bonhoeffer’s decision. As always in situations when reason fails, poetry best captures the spirit of things that elude exact analysis. Shortly after the failed assassination attempt of July 20, 1944, Bonhoeffer penned these lines as part of his poem “Stations on the Way to Freedom:”

To do and dare, not what is random but what is right  
 not to linger in the possible but boldly take hold of the real  
 not in escaping through thought, but in action alone is freedom.  
 Step out from fearful faltering into the storm of events,  
 carried only by God’s command and your faith,  
 and freedom will come and receive your spirit, rejoicing.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Bethge, *Am gegebenen Ort*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> DBW 8:571.

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**Bonhoeffer and Non-Violence**

## Abstract

Jens Zimmermann closes this volume with a nuanced statement of Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy to overthrow the government of Nazi Germany, including the attempted efforts to assassinate Hitler. Zimmermann responds both to those who argue that Bonhoeffer, as a pacifist, never took part in or condoned the plans to kill Hitler (see Nation et al., *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?*), and to those who claim that Bonhoeffer abandoned his earlier pacifism to adopt Reinhold Niebuhr's "critical" or "Christian" realism. Zimmermann shows that Bonhoeffer argued instead that such extreme forms of political resistance are unique personal acts of free responsibility for the sake of others in obedience to Christ, and therefore do not provide theological or ethical justification for the use of violence.