
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE PROBLEM OF DIRTY HANDS: WHAT COUNTS AS CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM?

迪特里希·潘霍华与“脏手”问题： 什么是基督徒的殉道？

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ABSTRACT

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, along with others implicated in the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler, was executed at the Flossenbuerg internment camp on April 9, 1945, less than a month before the final collapse of the Nazi regime in Berlin. Bonhoeffer was unusual among those implicated in the plot, in that he was both an ordained Christian minister and well-known in ecumenical circles in Europe and the USA. While Bonhoeffer was already held in custody on suspicion of anti-Nazi activities at the time of the unsuccessful assassination attempt, July 20, 1944, his role in it was confirmed when secret papers that his brother-in-law and co-conspirator, Hans von Dohnanyi, had preserved were discovered, and the full extent of the plot became known to Hitler and his staff. Many consider Bonhoeffer to be a Christian martyr, but his involvement in the assassination plot has always been controversial. Bonhoeffer's posthumously published writings, especially his *Letters and Papers from Prison* and his unfinished *Ethics*, have secured him an enduring reputation as an innovative theologian for, in his own terms, "a world come of age." While Bonhoeffer refused to defend his participation in the assassination plot on Christian and ethical grounds, both these works provide important clues as to how he thought about it.

BONHOEFFER'S LIFE AS A CHRISTIAN MINISTER

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, along with his twin sister Sabine, were the 6th and 7th of eight children born in 1906 to a prominent German family. His father, Karl, was a pioneering psychiatrist and neurologist, and his mother Paula (von Hase) was descended from a distinguished family of theologians and artists. Along with other family members, Bonhoeffer opposed the rise of the Nazi party in German culture and politics, and resisted its anti-Semitic policies. With the revolt of the so-called Confessing

Churches, and the promulgation of the *Barmen Declaration* of 1934, Bonhoeffer became a central figure in challenging the hegemony of the so-called “*Deutsche Christen*”¹ in the Protestant churches. Bonhoeffer’s own resistance went well beyond the *Declaration*’s abstract theological denunciation of the Nazi ideology, to active protest against the persecution of Jews, and the adoption of the “Aryan paragraph” requiring removal of Protestant pastors with Jewish ancestry (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 3101). Though committed to the position staked out in the *Declaration*, Bonhoeffer protested the apparent indifference of the leadership of the Confessing Churches to these administrative struggles (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 2694ff). After pastoral ministry work in the German congregations in London (U.K.), he returned to Germany in 1935 and was tasked with creating a seminary for the Confessing Churches at Finkenwalde, which despite its illegal status, he managed to keep going until the Gestapo closed it in March 1940.² During this time, Bonhoeffer had several other trips abroad, mostly seeking to alert partners in the ecumenical movement to the deteriorating situation in Germany for the

1 The term literally means “German Christians,” with the implication that a patriotic Christian must be absolutely loyal to Adolf Hitler as the “*Fuehrer*” or paramount Leader of Germany. This was the idolatrous claim to redefine Christian faith that was opposed by the Barmen Declaration in 1934, and precipitated the struggle within the German Evangelical Church, among the “Confessing Churches,” against the attempted Nazi takeover of Christianity in Germany. The full text of the Barmen Declaration is available in Schlingensiepen, (Kindle Locations 8384-8471). The identical text can be retrieved online at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>. Both are taken from Arthur C. Cochrane’s *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Cochrane, 1962). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962, pp. 237-242.

2 Schlingensiepen’s recent biography, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* (2010), is especially good at conveying the complexity of Bonhoeffer’s activities in and for, and often in spite of the Confessing Church, and its own struggle for survival under increased pressure from the Nazi dominated *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*. Understanding the complexity of the struggles involved is important for interpreting Bonhoeffer’s relatively opaque statements about the emergence of a “religionless Christianity” in *The Letters and Papers from Prison*, mostly written during his incarceration at Tegel Prison in Berlin (1942-1944). As Schlingensiepen observes, “To his deep unease, he was finding that the Confessing Church, in defending itself against violation by a regime of terror and lies, was leaving others threatened by that regime to their fate In this situation, it was a great discovery for Bonhoeffer to find that the only Gospel in the Bible is a Gospel turned toward the whole world.” (Kindle Edition, Location 7014).

individuals and congregations still resisting the Nazification of the Germany Evangelical Church.

Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the conspiracy to kill Hitler in October 1940, necessity dictated that Bonhoeffer accept an appointment with the *Abwehr*, the Office of Military Intelligence, which harboured many of the key figures in the resistance, and their conspiracies to assassinate Hitler. Joining the *Abwehr* enabled Bonhoeffer to avoid being drafted into military service, and Bonhoeffer was valued by the *Abwehr* leadership because of his influential contacts internationally. Recruited by his distinguished brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, he could serve as a courier for the resistance while participating in ecumenical meetings in neutral countries such as Switzerland and Sweden. In particular, the *Abwehr* used his friendship with UK Bishop George Bell to communicate the conspirators’ plans to the British Foreign Office, in the hope that eliminating Hitler would open the way to a negotiated settlement in the war.

Bonhoeffer’s various missions for the *Abwehr* as well as his monastic retreat were abruptly curtailed when, on April 5, 1943, he was arrested and incarcerated at the Tegel military prison in Berlin, on suspicion of financial corruption within the *Abwehr* unrelated to the conspiracy (Sifton and Stern, Kindle Location 1448). During his eighteen months in the Tegel prison, as the investigation dragged on, the *Abwehr* conspiracies continued, culminating in the attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944. Once the plot failed, and so spectacularly, the role of the *Abwehr* conspirators was soon exposed, as von Dohnanyi’s secret papers documenting the Nazi regime’s crimes were discovered at Zossen on September 22, 1944 (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 7177). On October 8, 1944, Bonhoeffer was transferred to the Gestapo prison on Prince Albert Street, where he was rigorously interrogated but apparently not tortured (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 7273). In early April 1945, after Hitler ordered the execution of surviving members of the *Abwehr* resistance group, Bonhoeffer was removed to the concentration camp at Flossenbuerg, where after a sham trial,

on the morning of April 9, 1945, he was hanged along with other members of the Canaris group. Hans von Dohnanyi, on that same day, was executed at Sachsenhausen.

WAS DIETRICH BONHOEFFER A CHRISTIAN MARTYR?

Clearly Bonhoeffer died actively resisting the atrocities of Hitler and the Nazi government. While virtually everything in his background and upbringing pointed toward his decision to join the resistance against the Nazis, he freely and knowingly chose to do so. He and his co-conspirators sought to end the Nazi regime in order to shorten the war and pave the way for a negotiated settlement that would restore peace and justice in Germany. That was their goal. From the perspective of those who shared his view of the evils of Nazism, the alleged treason involved in regime change was a heroic act of patriotism.

But was it an act of Christian martyrdom? There were other Christians who endorsed the Barmen Declaration and resisted the Nazification of their churches. Some of them were aware of the assassination plots but refused to participate. The Kreisau Circle, centered around Helmuth James Count von Moltke³, is an illuminating example. Several times during 1942 Von Moltke and Bonhoeffer met to coordinate elements of the resistance and, among other things, discussed reasons for and against assassination attempts. Von Moltke remained opposed, not only for Christian reasons, but also because he feared that Hitler's death would be regarded as another "stab in the back" by the German people, and thus would perpetuate the cultural pathologies that had enabled the Nazi movement. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, remained convinced that killing Hitler to end the Nazi regime was the only responsible thing to do, even for a disciple of

³ Von Moltke's life is well summarized in the public profile posted in 2018 by Niels Christian Lars Moerling on the *Geni* website. The Jesuit, Alfred Delp's involvement with von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle is well presented in an essay by Andreas Batlogg, published in *America Magazine*, January 21, 2008. Alfred Delp's martyrdom and the Christian spirituality that inspired it is well presented in this issue of the MRIJ, in Gerhold Becker's essay, "Spiritual Leadership in Hard Times: Karl Raher and Alfred Delp."

Christ (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 5706-5774).

To understand how Bonhoeffer, a professed Christian pacifist, had come to this decision, certain clues from his writings may be useful. In 1932, for example, at a time when Bonhoeffer and his family already were in opposition to the Nazi movement, he was invited to preach a sermon at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 2378-2436). The Biblical text for the Sermon is Colossians 3:1-4, in which St. Paul is portrayed urging his congregation to "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." What Bonhoeffer finds in this text is not another spiritual bromide urging withdrawal from the world, but an invitation to serious struggle within it. Here is how Bonhoeffer understood the struggle ahead:

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Instead, and precisely because our minds are set on things above, we are that much more stubborn and purposeful in protesting here on earth... Does it have to be so that Christianity, which began as immensely revolutionary, now has to remain conservative for all time? That every new movement has to blaze its path

without the church, and that the church always takes twenty years to see what has actually happened? If it really must be so, then we must not be surprised when, for

Ethics, which is less an academic treatise than a calling to spiritual transformation in acts of responsibility motivated by faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The case for claiming Bonhoeffer as a Christian martyr therefore rests not upon whether his hands were perfectly clean, or not, but on the formation of his character over time as he developed his relationship, through trial and error, with Jesus Christ.

our church as well, times come when the blood of martyrs will be demanded. But this blood, if we truly have the courage and honour and loyalty to shed it, will not be so innocent and shining as that of the first witnesses. Our blood will be overlaid with our own great guilt. (DBW 11, 446) (Schlingensiepen, Kindle Location 2427)

A serious response to Christ's calling, as Schlingensiepen points out, "dashes any hope for a comfortable life." The time will come "when the blood of martyrs will be demanded," which Bonhoeffer foresees as the outcome of the emerging Christian resistance to Nazism. But the martyrdom he envisions is not, and cannot be, innocent: "Our blood will be overlaid with our own great guilt." The facts of his life and his activities in the resistance subsequent to this sermon suggest that Bonhoeffer's, indeed, was a Christian martyrdom, but unlike Christian martyrs of antiquity, his could not have been innocent.

BONHOEFFER'S ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF DIRTY HANDS

Bonhoeffer's great unfinished work, *Ethics*, may help explain his sense of guilt and responsibility. The guilt is not generalised, a simple recognition of his inescapable complicity in the fallenness of human nature; it is specific and concrete. When one is faced with a situation embodying the necessity of acting responsibly, one's decision either to act or not to act, inevitably, produces guilt. How one deals with this guilt is the great lesson to be discerned in Bonhoeffer's

By contrast, ethics, as conventionally presented in the universities, in Bonhoeffer's view, was a fraudulent attempt to establish guilt or innocence, neither of which could overcome humanity's alienation from God. Ethics' attempt to distinguish rationally between good and evil, he argues, addresses a pseudo-problem or distraction primordially symbolized in the wisdom of the Serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-6). Knowledge of good and evil is deployed in order—impossibly—to distinguish one's own innocence from the guilt ascribed to everyone else. Bonhoeffer is particularly critical of Immanuel Kant and his reasoning, for example, on truth-telling and lying (*Ethics*, Kindle Location 3382).⁴ The practical consequences of Kant's moral absolutism are monstrous. Kant would endanger people by refusing to lie to a psychopathic killer seeking to destroy them. Other forms of ethical rationalism, like British utilitarianism, are equally monstrous in many of their practical applications. But such practical errors, in Bonhoeffer's view, are rooted in the moralists' inability to understand the nature of responsibility as a personal calling mediated through God in Jesus Christ.

Given Bonhoeffer's attitude toward ethics, it is no surprise that he does not address the problem of dirty hands or attempt to justify morally his involvement in the plot to kill Hitler.

⁴ Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* concludes with an essay, "What is meant by 'Telling the Truth'?" (Kindle Location 5040-5161), which analyses the question with due regard for the specificity of various situations in which telling the truth may or may not be owed, as well as their theological implications. This essay is useful in helping readers to understand Bonhoeffer's activities in the *Abwehr* conspiracy, which necessarily involved practicing deception and misdirection, if not lying.

Had he chosen to do so, the inherited traditions of Christian ethics would have provided him with a moral justification of tyrannicide or the defence of violent resistance against evil, implicit in the just war theory and its applications (Watson, 2015). But no such argument is to be found in Bonhoeffer's writings, especially in his *Ethics*. Instead he outlines a theory of Christian responsibility that resonates with the Pauline description of living with Christ in this world. With responsibility comes guilt, for such a response to God's command may lead one to violate the norms of an ostensibly civilized society. Christian discipleship, if it is authentic, may entail living outside the comfort zone of one's family, one's society and culture, and even one's church. Christ may require us to get our hands dirty, that is, to engage in activities that violate the rule of law. Accepting responsibility, in his view, may lead a person to cross the line, engaging in or supporting acts of violent resistance.

Responsibility, as it is defined in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* (Location 3058ff), is emphatically Christocentric, a concrete and personal response to God's calling or Vocation (Location 3515ff), which admits of no distinction between religious and secular activities. In accepting his share of the guilt involved in the assassination plot, and acting with responsibility in it, Bonhoeffer's only concern was whether this in fact was what God was commanding him to do with his life, a point on which he never wavered. One searches in vain through Bonhoeffer's writings—either the *Ethics* or the *Letters and Papers from Prison*—for an *apologia pro vita sua*.⁵ He certainly does not provide anything that is generalizable, as if his response to God's command could be used as a guide to moral action for any and all other persons similarly situated. It was a source of concern, of course, that he could not persuade his colleagues in the

⁵ The essay that begins the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, "After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at New Year, 1943," (Kindle Location 103-338), is a comprehensive statement of his perspective on the responsibilities he shared with family members and others in the resistance. It is not a personal vindication, but an attempt to comfort his associates and strengthen them for the days ahead. It clearly lays out the Christian basis for acts of responsibility that inevitably risk suffering a death for the sake of God's command. This is Bonhoeffer's testimony to the daily lived experience of martyrdom.

Confessing Churches to become more directly involved in the resistance, just as he must have been concerned that he and von Moltke could not reach agreement on how to bring the Nazi regime to an end. But their disagreements could not shake his faith in the path that he sincerely believed God was calling him to walk as His witness.

The more one goes into the details of Bonhoeffer's Christocentric ethics, the more it is clear that his involvement in the violent plot against Hitler was continuous with his previous acts of nonviolent resistance. In Bonhoeffer's perspective, if he was a Christian pacifist before the rise of Hitler, he remained one, even as he later became involved in the assassination plot. His involvement was exceptional, a response dictated by the necessity of the concrete moment, itself willed by God. The consistency of his response rests squarely on what he regarded as his personal relationship with Jesus Christ, trusting in the mercy of the One who called him to act responsibly. Whether one acts or refrains from acting responsibly, one's hands are dirty, since no one can escape from the moral ambiguity of what life confronts us with. The case for claiming Bonhoeffer as a Christian martyr therefore rests not upon whether his hands were perfectly clean, or not, but on the formation of his character over time as he developed his relationship, through trial and error, with Jesus Christ. If he is regarded as a Christian martyr, it is because of the authenticity of that relationship, and nothing else.



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