Mark Alterman, Manhattan Christian College

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer 's** *Letters and Papers from* ***Prison* as a Core Text**

**on the Intersection of the Sacred and the Secular**

Steven Haynes of Rhodes College described the remarkable interest in Dietrich Bonhoeffer among Protestant[[1]](#endnote-1) Christians in the twentieth century, in his book *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*. In the 1960s, radical young theologians were finding the seeds for a secular theology in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Thomas J.J. Alitzer and William Hamilton proclaimed the death of God, while Harvey Cox heralded the *Secular City*. In the 70s and 80s, mainline liberal Protestant theologians began to claim him as one of their own because of his work in the ecumenical movement and his championing of the causes of peace and civil rights.

Then in the 90s and beyond, Bonhoeffer's legacy was seized by American conservative evangelicals. James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministry produced a radio drama on his life that won a Peabody Award in 1997. Eric Metaxas's biography published in 2011 renewed the interest among this constituency. Metaxas has not been bashful about promoting his book, as demonstrated by promotional photographs showing presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama receiving copies from the author.

It is both Bonhoeffer's writings and his life that prompt the interest. This interest is seen in the titles of four recent biographical studies.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy;*

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance;*

*Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer;* and

*Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking*.

These new biographies were made possible by the publication of the 17-volume *Bonhoeffer Works* project. The carefully edited and annotated volumes began to appear in German in the 1980s and reached completion by 1999. The first volume of the English edition appeared in 1995, and the series is now reaching completion.

The intriguing elements of Bonhoeffer's life include his pastoral work with congregations in Barcelona, London, and Berlin, where he was particularly known for his success in working with tough street kids. In 1929 he spent a year in New York as a post-doctoral fellow at Union Theological Seminary and participated in the life of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, remarking that it was the only church in New York where he heard the Gospel preached. Back in Germany he taught academic theology at Berlin until he was dismissed as a pacifist. Then he organized a preachers' seminary in Finkenwald for the Confessing Church.. The seminary was organized on the model of a monastic community. His two books from this experience, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship* emphasize prayer, devotion, Bible study, fellowship, confession, and costly discipleship, as opposed to "cheap grace." In 1939 he was offered a position at Union Theological seminary, but his sense of responsibility compelled him to return to his people in their time of crisis--on the last ship bound for Europe, as it turned out.

He was conscripted into military service but avoided combat duty by enlisting in the *Abwehr*, the military intelligence. Because of his international contacts the Germans believed he could provide them with valuable information; in fact, he served as a double agent. He was arrested with other members of his family after they helped a Jewish family escape to Switzerland. Two weeks before his prison was liberated by the Allies Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his brother Klaus, and two brothers-in-law were put to death on special orders from Hitler, who was convinced (as are most of Bonhoeffer's interpreters today) that they were involved in the conspiracy to assassinate the Führer.

Systematic theology in Europe has always been an interdisciplinary enterprise. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, completed at the age of 21 and called "a theological miracle" by Karl Barth, he interacted with the social philosophy of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and others. In his *habilitationschrift* (qualification to lecture in the university) *Act and Being*, Heidegger was his dialogue partner.

It is Bonhoeffer's continued interaction with the whole philosophical and literary tradition of Western civilization that makes *his Letters and Papers from Prison* worthy to be considered a core text on the question of secularization. In a letter written to his parents after four weeks of imprisonment, he describes his daily routine:

Of the fourteen hours of each day, I walk for about three hours in my cell, many kilometers; also, a half hour in the yard. I read, study, and work. I especially enjoyed Jeremias Gotthelf again, with his clear, healthy, and quiet style. I am well and healthy.[[2]](#endnote-2)

His reading included novels, for enjoyment and to pass the time, but they also furnished material for reflection. The original title of the *Letters and Papers from Prison* in German, *Wiederstand und Ergebung*, or "Resistance and Submission," is taken from a letter of in which he is reflecting on Don Quixote. Bonhoeffer had served a year as a vicar to an expatriate congregation in Barcelona, where he was presented with a deluxe edition of the Spanish classic. He reflects on the dilemma of knowing how to act in times of crisis: when to resist and when to give way. In Don Quixote's case, "resistances finishes by losing its meaning in reality and is dissipated in theories and fantasies, while Sancho Panza represents the cunning and complacency to accept things as they are."[[3]](#endnote-3)

The study in his daily routine included serious scientific, historical, and philosophical works. The letters document his requests for specific books and note his progress in working through these books. For example, "I am reading, with great interest, Weizsäcker's book on the *World View of Physics* and hope to learn a good deal from it, even for my own work."[[4]](#endnote-4)

But what was the "work" Bonhoeffer that was able to do from prison? The work was continued theological reflection on a project he had begun before the imprisonment and hoped to complete after the war: offering his contribution toward rebuilding *European* society "along Christian lines." At the time of his arrest, Bonhoeffer left behind 13 manuscripts of his *Ethics*, on which he had labored intensively.[[5]](#endnote-5) Referring back to this unfinished project, he reflects,

Personally I reproach myself for not having finished the *Ethics* (at the moment it is presumably confiscated), and it comforts me somewhat that I told you the most important things. Even if you were not to remember it any longer, it would nevertheless resurface is some way indirectly. Furthermore my thoughts were, of course, still incomplete.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Shortly afterward he wrote, "I have the feeling that I am becoming significantly older here and sometimes think my life is more or less behind me and all I have left to do is to complete my *Ethics*."[[7]](#endnote-7)

The *Ethics* was his attempt to lay the theological foundations for a society congruous with "Christendom", the form of civilization that had developed especially in Europe over a period of a thousand years before the war, but suited to the realities that would emerge after the war. He was not thinking of a theocracy, but a society that made human flourishing possible, with a recognition of human dignity, equality, and rights; and a society that had room for a vibrant faith to flourish in communities of people called to that form of life. In Christendom not everyone was equally devout, but everyone shared common values based on a broad agreement with basic assumptions, especially the value of human life as created in the image of God and the legitimacy of a church having a place "in the center of the village."

The work that occupied Dietrich Bonhoeffer during this project was that of thinking through the unresolved issues in his *Ethics*. He was not thinking primarily of details or specific issues but of the one big question--what does a Christian society mean in a secular age? What in fact is Christianity and who is Christ in a world without any religion at all?

While many of the letters to family and friends found in DBWE 8 are interesting for their human interest and historical perspective, a subset of the letters are those referred to by their author as his "theological letters." It was his hope that Eberhard Bethge, his closest friend who also married Bonhoeffer's niece Renate, would preserve these letters and perhaps complete Bonhoeffer's project through his own writing. The casual way he makes the request perhaps is to avoid alerting the censors who read all the letters, or perhaps it is an expression of his patrician upbringing and reluctance to impose on a friend. But the request reveals a desire to leave a legacy and not to have wasted his life tilting at windmills.

By the way, it would be very nice if you didn't throw away my theological letters but, since they are surely a burden for you to keep there, send them off to Renate from time to time. I might perhaps like to read them again later for my work. One writes some things in a more uninhibited and lively way in a letter than in a book, and in a conversation through letters I often have better ideas than when I'm writing for myself. But it's not important![[8]](#endnote-8)

Bethge not only kept this request but devoted the rest of his life to preserving Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy.

The questions Bonhoeffer raises in the theological letters will be familiar to readers of core texts such as Kant's essay "What Is Enlightenment," and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*. As academic questions they had long been familiar to Bonhoeffer and Bethge. But the crisis of the war brought a new urgency to these questions.

What might surprise or perhaps even worry you would be my theological thoughts and where they are leading, and here is where I really miss you very much. I don't know anyone else with whom I can talk about them and arrive at some clarity. What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when we could tell people that with words--whether with theological or with pious words--is past, as is the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means the age of religion altogether: We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Two factors prompted Bonhoeffer's concerns. The most difficult was the churches' failure to resist the idolatry of National Socialism. In 1936 Bonhoeffer had joined Karl Barth and other brave church leaders in forming the "Confessing Church" and rejecting the claim of the "German Christians" that God was revealing himself through the German nation and its Führer. Bonhoeffer lost his teaching post in Berlin and became the leader of an illegal seminary for preachers in the confessing church. This is where his friendship with Bethge was forged. But after the seminary was shut down, the Confessing Church movement remained small and marginal, and ultimately fell apart.

One of the "theological letters" is a remarkable baptismal letter written for Renate and Eberhard Bethge's child, who was named after his uncle Dietrich.

You are being baptized today as a Christian. All those great and ancient words of the Christian proclamation will be pronounced over you . . . What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings.[[10]](#endnote-10)

In the same letter Bonhoeffer laments,

We believed we could make our way in life with reason and justice, and when both failed us, we no longer saw any way forward. We have also overestimated, time and again, the importance of reasonableness and justice in influencing the course of history.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In light of this letter, it is striking that the other reason for Bonhoeffer's questions about the meaning of Christianity in a secular age is the irreversible forward progress of modernity. Humanity has reached maturity, has come of age, and the clock cannot be turned back.

Weizsäcker's book on the *Weltbild der Physik* continues to preoccupy me a great deal. It has again brought home to me quite clearly that we shouldn't think of God as the stopgap for the incompleteness of our knowledge . . . We should find God in what we know, not in what we don't know . . . This is true of the relation between God and scientific knowledge, but it is also true of the universal human questions about death, suffering, and guilt. Today, even for these questions, there are human answers that can completely disregard God . . . God wants to be recognized in the midst of our lives, in life and not only in dying, in health and strength and not only in suffering, in action and not only in sin.[[12]](#endnote-12)

And so the church is wrong to exploit human weakness. There are secular counterparts to the clerical exploitation of guilt and weakness.

Here is where the secularized offshoots of Christian theology come in, that is, the existential philosophers and the psychotherapists, to prove to secure, contented, and happy human beings that they are in reality miserable and desperate and just don't want to admit that they are in a perilous situation . . . Where there is health, strength, security, and simplicity, these experts scent sweet fruit on which they can gnaw or lay their corrupting eggs.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Likewise Bonhoeffer considered any Christian attack on the world's coming of age as pointless, ignoble, and unchristian. "Pointless--because it appears to me like trying to put a person who has become an adult back into puberty . . . Ignoble--because an attempt is being made here to exploit people's weaknesses . . . Unchristian--because it confuses Christ with a particular stage of human religiousness."[[14]](#endnote-14)

Bonhoeffer's challenge to religious colleges and universities is to integrate secular studies in a way that does not see their findings as a great falling away from God or a way of pushing God to the margins, but as a way of seeking God in the center of life. In his prison reading he found an ally for this project in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. From this source he learned that "only when one loves life and the earth so much that [if it is lost] everything seems to be lost . . . may one believe in the resurrection of the dead and a new world."[[15]](#endnote-15)

1. Catholic thinkers do not seem to have noticed Bonhoeffer, although they have engaged his mentor Karl Barth. There is no reference to Bonhoeffer in the index of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age.*

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Letter of May 4, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English (DBWE)8, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Letter of February 21, 1944, DBWE 8, 304. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Letter of May 24, 1944, DBWE 8 , 401. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The notebooks were recovered and have been edited as *Ethics* DBWE 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Letter of November 18, 1943, DBWE 8, 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Letter of December 15, DBWE 8, 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Letter of July 9, 1944, DBWE 8, 458. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Letter of April 30, 1944, DBWE 8, 362. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Baptismal Letter, May 1944, DBWE 8, 389. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. DBWE 8, 388. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Letter of May 24, 1944, DBWE 8, 405-406. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Letter of June 8, 1944, DBWE 8, 427. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. DBWE 8, 427. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Letter of December 5, 1943, DBWE 8, 213.

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