

Volume XXIV - (2023)

A Note on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Pacifism

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Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 24, 2023 - Pages 47 - 52

I approached Bonhoeffer as a recreational reader via Eric Metaxas' respectfully written biography, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy*, followed by Bonhoeffer's best-known work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It is sometimes claimed that Bonhoeffer renounced his former pacifism in the face of Nazi Germany. However, renunciation of those views is not obvious, and is the subject of speculation by those who knew him as well as by later generations. In my paper I will start by exploring the record of Bonhoeffer's writing on pacifism, and will include a couple of testimonies from his contemporaries. In addition to that I will reference the words of several current theologians and professors who have studied Bonhoeffer's words and actions, and added to the scholarship on this incredible man's brief life.

My thesis is that Bonhoeffer was never a pacifist in the Anabaptist tradition, nor the order of Gandhi. Rather, he was a deeply devoted Christian and theologian rooted in Lutheranism, who embraced the Christian ethic of forgiveness. However, as the reality of the Nazi horrors came to be known, action was needed and Bonhoeffer recognized it. His decision to engage with the resistance didn't require him to set aside his faith or beliefs, but rather to step into them even further, responding to what God needed in the time he lived.

First let's start with the dictionary definition of pacifism: "the belief that any violence, including war, is unjustifiable under any circumstances, and that all disputes should be settled by peaceful means." A related term is *ahimsa* (to do no harm), which is a core philosophy in several Indian religions. *Ahimsa* served as a cornerstone for the practice Mahatma Gandhi called nonviolent opposition in his work with the Indian Independence movement.

"Conditional pacifism" is a type of pacifistic belief, defined as "one against war and violence in principle, but accepting that there are circumstances when war may lead to less suffering."^[1] I believe this explanation of pacifism would best describe the view that Bonhoeffer developed over the course of his life.

Bonhoeffer's Own Words

Bonhoeffer references pacifism in a handful of lectures, sermons and personal correspondence, and these are the examples referenced over and over by later biographers. Those I am sharing come from a time prior to the start of WW II, a period when he undertook serious study of the Sermon on the Mount – a text often referenced by religious pacifists. In a lecture to a student association in 1932, Bonhoeffer said, "The command, "You shall not kill," the word that says "Love your enemies," is given to us simply to be obeyed. For Christians, any military service, except in the ambulance corps, and any preparation for war is forbidden."^[2]

In the same year, in a speech delivered at the International Youth Peace Conference in Czechoslovakia, he said, "Because there is no way for us to understand war as God's order of preservation and therefore as God's commandment, and because war needs to be idealized and idolatized in order to live, today's war, the next war, must be condemned by the church... We must face the next war with all the power of resistance, rejection, condemnation... We should not balk here at using the word 'pacifism'. Just as certainly as we submit the ultimate *pacemfacere* [to create peace] to God, we too must *pacemfacere* to overcome war."^[3]

A frequently cited quote regarding Bonhoeffer's support of non-violence is taken from a 1936 letter to friend Elizabeth Zinn. He references his study of the Sermon on the Mount, writing, "Christian pacifism, which a brief time before... I had passionately disputed, suddenly came into focus as something utterly self-evident."

Bonhoeffer's Friends' words

In addition to his own words, the memories of close friends testify to his sense that war and killing were to be avoided.

Bonhoeffer's best friend, Eberhard Bethge tells that in 1935, when the military draft was reinstated in Germany, Bonhoeffer invited two conscientious objectors to speak to students at his seminary at Finkenwalde. At the time, it was illegal to be a conscientious objector, and even most religious people would not have considered taking such action.

While studying in America, Bonhoeffer had the opportunity to view the new film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The book, written by a German who served as a soldier in WWI, and the movie as well, had been banned across Europe. Bonhoeffer saw it with French classmate Jean Lasserre. These two men, one German and one French, who represented the worst of enemies, were brought to tears in the theater. "For Bonhoeffer it was unbearable. Lasserre later said he could barely console Bonhoeffer afterward. Lasserre believed that on that afternoon Bonhoeffer became a pacifist."^[4]

But was he committed to this idea? Reflecting on this question, we need to consider two things: First, the development of the man's writing as he matures. Second, the backdrop of the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government created circumstances and situations that could not have been imagined in another time. While the study of the Bible allowed a scholarly view of what is right and wrong, those choices might not have been available in the extreme setting of war. This is especially true as Bonhoeffer began to hear the stories of atrocities against the Jews.

The Scholars

There is a substantial amount of scholarship and writing which interprets Bonhoeffer's thoughts on pacifism. There's even an opera on the subject: a two-act opera entitled *Bonhoeffer's Dilemma* that debuted at Penn State University in 1999.

Within the last ten to 15 years, there appears to be two camps in this argument of support or denial of Bonhoeffer's "dilemma" regarding pacifism. We will look at three scholars, contemporaries who engaged in this very conversation regarding Bonhoeffer in a back-and-forth of books and articles, which makes for very interesting reading. Here are the players I will reference:

John Howard Yoder, a 20th century American Mennonite theologian and a role model for Hauerwas. Yoder, who passed away in 1997, is not exactly contemporary with the others mentioned here, but wrote on Bonhoeffer and is frequently cited by Hauerwas in relation to

Bonhoeffer.

Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University. Hauerwas is often quoted by the team of Mark Thiessen Nation, Siegrist and Umbel, in their book, *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* Hauerwas and Nation have written together in response to criticisms leveled by others.

In the non-pacifist camp, we have Michael DeJonge, Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the University of South Florida and author of several books on Bonhoeffer.

Hauerwas suggests a similarity between Bonhoeffer and John Howard Yoder. In a book titled *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, published in 2004, Hauerwas writes that after refreshing his study of Bonhoeffer, “I had not expected to discover how similar Bonhoeffer’s ecclesial reflections were to lessons I have learned from John Howard Yoder.”^[5] Hauerwas admits, “I acknowledge that my presentation of Bonhoeffer makes Bonhoeffer sound very much like Yoder (and me), but I think I have a good case for why that is not as crazy as it sounds.”^[6]

With respect to Hauerwas, I don’t agree. Bonhoeffer’s development of a peace ethic is scriptural and doctrinal, but it doesn’t put peace in the center as a requirement for God’s Kingdom. Which means that when necessary, the Christian is not bound by peace-keeping as a requirement. Bonhoeffer even argued for the necessity of certain kinds of killing, namely, those that preserve the world for Christ.

Hauerwas frequently references Bonhoeffer and Yoder together, as if they are in close association. This is a little surprising, given that Yoder was a Mennonite with committed Anabaptist views. In his own works on Bonhoeffer, “Yoder explicitly distanced himself from Bonhoeffer on the issue of pacifism.”^[7] In a 1987 lecture published in 2010 named “The Christological Presuppositions of Discipleship,” Yoder cites several differences between his “rootage” in Anabaptist faith and Bonhoeffer’s in Lutheranism. Yoder recognizes Bonhoeffer’s take on peace as “just war pacifism,” which he distinguishes as different from his own Anabaptist tradition.

In his essay titled “Bonhoeffer’s Non-Commitment to Non-Violence: A Response to Stanley Hauerwas,” Michael De Jonge emphasizes the need to read Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran rather than through an Anabaptist lens. He shares several passages in which Bonhoeffer highlights the errors of the “enthusiasts” (*der Schwärmer* in German, a derogatory term, similar to fanatics). According to De Jonge, Bonhoeffer in his World Alliance lecture “explicitly distinguishes his position on peace from that of the enthusiasts no fewer than three times. On one occasion he says that the church must find a way to proclaim peace without “falling away... into enthusiasm.” On the second occasion, he describes an approach to peace that “must be rejected as Enthusiastic and therefore not Protestant.” On the third occasion he says that peace should come, “not out of the Enthusiast establishment of a commandment – for example the fifth [that shalt not kill] – above all others.” Throughout his World Alliance lecture, Bonhoeffer works hard to ensure that his position on peace is not mistaken for enthusiasm.”^[8]

Conclusion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was above all else a Christian theologian whose peace ethic developed from his theology. His thoughts on peace and war from his younger days continued to develop as he witnessed the changes taking place in his nation, society, even in his church. As Hitler grew into power and the Nazi atrocities became known it became untenable for a Christian to do nothing.

Bonhoeffer’s original arrest had nothing to do with the plot to kill Hitler. The original charges against him were conspiring to rescue Jews, using his foreign travel connected to the Abwehr for non-intelligence matters, and misusing his intelligence position to help the pastors of the Confessing Church avoid military service. These actions were in alignment with his peace ethic, as was his role in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler.

I can’t help but wonder, what would have become of Bonhoeffer had he survived another three weeks, seen the end of the war, married his fiancée, raised a family and continued to preach and write? How would that life experience have impacted his faith? When someone is martyred, their faith becomes frozen in time in a sense, an example of that time perhaps, but how would that person have applied their experience in today’s world?

In closing I present a moving paragraph from Bonhoeffer. More than peace, forgiveness is required of a Christian. It does not surprise one to learn these are the words of a man who became a martyr:

Suffering injustice does not hurt the Christian, but doing injustice does. Indeed, evil can do only one thing to you, namely, make you also become evil. If it does, then it wins. Therefore, do not repay evil with evil. If you do, you will not hurt the other person; you will hurt yourself. You are not in danger when evil happens to you, but the person who does you wrong is in danger and will suffer from it, if you do not offer help. Therefore, for the sake of the other person and your responsibility for that person, do not repay evil with evil...

How can we overcome evil? By our forgiving it endlessly. How does that happen? By our seeing enemies as they really are: as people for whom Christ died, as people Christ loves.^[9]

Notes

[1] Mike de Sousa, “Defining Pacifism,” Active Pacifist (website) www.activepacifist.world. Accessed 5/2023.

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Christ and Peace,” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 11, p. 367.

[3] Bonhoeffer, “On the Theological Foundation of the Work of the World Alliance,” delivered July 26, 1932.

[4] Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, p. 113.

[5] Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith, Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, (2004), p. 18

[6] Ibid.

[7] Michael De Jeong, “Bonhoeffer’s Non-Commitment to Non-Violence: A response to Stanley Hauerwas,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, June 2016, p. 383.

[8] Ibid, p. 388.

[9] *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, Vol 15, pp. 466, 469-70.

