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“Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Relevance for Post-Holocaust Christian Theology”

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1. Introduction

In April 2001 I received a request from Dr. Mordecai Paldiel, Director of the Department for the Righteous at Yad Vashem, to submit an opinion on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's qualifications for the honor of being designated a "righteous gentile." Dr. Paldiel raised three central questions: 1) the question of Bonhoeffer's public opposition to the Nazi anti-Jewish measures, not just on behalf of those who had converted to Christianity but on behalf of all Jews; 2) the question of whether Bonhoeffer ever aided Jews directly; and 3) the issue of Bonhoeffer's theological anti-Judaism and, more specifically, whether Bonhoeffer ever explicitly repudiated his 1933 writings that reflected this anti-Judaism.

In my reply I deliberately did not take a position on whether I personally thought Yad Vashem should honor Bonhoeffer or not. At the risk of sounding disingenuous, I don't really have an opinion. There are two reasons. The first and most important is that I don't think it is up to us Christians to decide who is honored by Yad Vashem. That sacred ground is where the Jewish community, especially the survivors of the Shoah, honors those who rescued Jews. The Holocaust was preceded by a long history of anti-Jewish violence in Christian Europe that was often sanctioned by the church. Between 1933 and 1945, Christians and their leaders were all too often apathetic and even complicit in the Nazi persecution and genocide of the Jews. Christians should approach this history and its Jewish victims with a great deal of humility.

The second reason is perhaps more relevant for the purposes of this paper. My own interest in Bonhoeffer has never been based upon whether I think he is a hero. The questions raised by Dr. Paldiel are important ones and they continue to be debated. As of this writing, a truly thorough analysis of these points in the entire Bonhoeffer opus in

conjunction with more recent historical research still remains to be done. Only now are his complete writings appearing in English, and several recent works offer new documented evidence that has given more detail about his resistance activities.¹ The Bonhoeffer opus remains one of the most fascinating, complex, and well-documented historical examples we have of the intersection of theology and activism, giving tremendous insight, not only into his times and into ours, but also into how Christian thought changes in response to historical events. The iconography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer actually undermines a serious examination of his significance.

Thus, in replying to Yad Vashem, I simply outlined what I considered to be the main historical facts in response to the questions that had been raised. These are as follows:

In looking for evidence of public opposition to Nazi anti-Jewish laws, the first piece of evidence would be his ecumenical activism throughout the period, and here we

¹ Publication of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition (hereafter referred to as DBWE) by Fortress Press is not yet complete, and the volumes with historical material most relevant to the topic here – volumes 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15 – are still in the editorial process. The German historian Winfried Meyer's monumental *Unternehmen Sieben: eine Rettungsaktion für vom Holocaust Bedrohte aus dem Amt Ausland/Abwehr im Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag Anton Hain, 1993) offers the most thorough documentation of the resistance circles in which Bonhoeffer moved, with a great deal of new material, but research remains to be done on some aspects. For example, a much closer study could be made of the contacts between Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, who was deported from Germany in July 1933 for helping Jews and remained active in the European rescue network thereafter. (Bonhoeffer first met Siegmund-Schultze during the 1920s and continued to have contact with him throughout the period, meeting with him in Switzerland in the early 1940s in the context of his resistance activities).

must look both at Bonhoeffer's role and that of the ecumenical circles in which he moved. The earliest church protests against Nazi anti-Jewish measures came from Christian leaders active in the European and North American ecumenical movement. Many of these protests were explicitly articulated in terms of civil liberties issues and focused on the plight of all Jews, not only those who had converted to Christianity.² At the September 1933 international meeting of the World Alliance in Sofia, Bulgaria, Bonhoeffer was a crucial figure in pushing European ecumenical leaders to condemn the Nazi measures. The statement issued by this conference explicitly condemned "the treatment that people of Jewish ancestry and association have suffered in Germany," adding: "We especially deplore the fact that the State measures against the Jews in Germany have had such an effect on public opinion that in some circles the Jewish race is considered a race of inferior status."³ The wording of the Sofia statement was particularly striking because it condemned the anti-Jewish measures in general, not merely in terms of the attempts to introduce an "Aryan paragraph" into church law. The Nazi government understood this as a broader political critique as well: Bonhoeffer's role in Sofia provoked a written protest sent by the German Foreign Ministry to the church leadership in Berlin, charging that the Sofia statement amounted to international "incitement against Germany"

² Two early works that documented this were *Judaism and Christianity under the Impact of National Socialism*, ed. Otto Dov Kulka and Paul Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem: Historical Society of Israel and Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1987); and *The Grey Book: A Collection of Protests against Anti-Semitism and the Persecution of Jews, Issued by Non-Roman Catholic Churches and Church Leaders during Hitler's Rule*, ed. Johan Snoek (New York: Humanities Press, 1970). Armin Boyens' two-volume work, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene. Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969 and 1973), also gives a great deal of background.

³ Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene*, vol. 2, 68.

("Verhetzung gegen Deutschland"), which led to a reprimand for Bonhoeffer.⁴

The second pivotal action was Bonhoeffer's activism at the Berlin Steglitz synod of the Prussian Confessing church in September 1935, two weeks after the passage of the Nuremberg laws. In advance of the synod, two resolutions were circulated among the delegates: one that would have effectively given church sanction to the Nuremberg laws; the other a proposal denouncing the church's silence about the persecution of Jews (not just "Jewish Christians") and calling for the Confessing Church to publicly oppose the Nazi measures.⁵ The writers of this second proposal summoned Bonhoeffer and his seminary students to strengthen their ranks at the Steglitz synod. Bonhoeffer arrived with the Finkenwalde seminarians. The group had to sit in the balcony and was not allowed to speak; by all accounts they behaved loudly and rambunctiously as the official delegates debated below. But the statement they came to support was not even put on the synod agenda for a vote, and once again the Confessing Church remained silent about the Nazi persecution of the Jews. Nonetheless, Bonhoeffer and his allies at the synod did succeed in preventing synodal affirmation of the Nuremberg laws.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Wolfgang Gerlach, *And the Witnesses were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Jews*, translated by Victoria J. Barnett (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 84-85 and 94-99, and Christine-Ruth Müller, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Kampf gegen die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1990), 210. More recent research has led to a revision of the historiography of the document presented to the synod and the synod's response; see Dietgard Meyer, "Elisabeth Schmitz: Die Denkschrift 'Zur Lage der deutschen Nichtarier'", in *Katharina Staritz: 1903-1953*, ed. Hannelore Erhart, Ilse Meseberg-Haubold, and Dietgard Meyer (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999), 187-273.

⁶ Gerlach, *And the Witnesses*, 94-99.

A third example was Bonhoeffer's ongoing engagement on behalf of refugees attempting to flee Nazi Germany. If we look only at the cases in which Bonhoeffer was approached directly, we have a paper trail of isolated instances, and it is often unclear, particularly during his time in London, as to whether these were Jews who had converted to Christianity or not.⁷ There is Bonhoeffer's letter of July 13, 1934, to Reinhold Niebuhr in the United States, asking for Niebuhr's help for two refugees who wanted to emigrate from Nazi Germany: a Jewish law student and Social Democrat named Kurt Berlowitz, and the political dissident Armin Wegner (who was later honored by Yad Vashem).⁸ There are references by Bonhoeffer, George Bell, and others to his efforts on behalf of refugees during his time in London, from October 1933 to April 1935. There is the correspondence from Max-Peter Meyer in 1939 that documents Bonhoeffer's role in helping the Meyers reach the United States.⁹ Finally, Bonhoeffer was involved in the "Operation Seven" rescue of fourteen individuals in 1941 who reached Switzerland. Many of those whom he helped were "non-Aryan Christians"; others (including three of those rescued in Operation Seven) were either secular or observant Jews. Bonhoeffer's motivation in these efforts is clear in his letter to Reinhold

Niebuhr in February 1933, where he wrote: "it would be precipitous to say even one word about conditions here in Germany...here, too, we will have to open up a Civil Liberties Union soon."¹⁰

A fourth and key piece of evidence is the report written by Bonhoeffer and Confessing Church lawyer Friedrich Perels in October 1941 at the request of Hans von Dohnanyi about the deportations of Jews from Berlin.¹¹ This report was sent to several members of the German resistance, as well as to ecumenical contacts in Geneva. This report appears to be part of the series of documents sent abroad at the behest of Hans von Dohnanyi, beginning in the fall of 1939, which conveyed very detailed information about German atrocities against Jews on the eastern front as well as the intensifying persecution in Germany.¹²

Thus, there is a fairly detailed record of Bonhoeffer's activism and clear opposition against the Nazi anti-Jewish measures, as well as his commitment to help its victims. As to the third point raised by Paldiel, however – whether Bonhoeffer ever repudiated his theological anti-Judaism – I wrote that this was a question with no definitive answer. There are certainly indications, which I will mention below,

⁷ This is significant because the Confessing Church protests against Aryan legislation were focused almost exclusively on the plight of "non-Aryan Christians" – i.e., people of Jewish descent who had converted. As time passed and state pressures on the churches intensified, Confessing support even for this group diminished. But with very few exceptions Christians were completely silent about the plight of religiously observant and secular Jews. Hence the question about whether Bonhoeffer's concern extended to all refugees, or only those who were Christian, is an entirely legitimate one.

⁸ *London: 1933-1935* (DBWE 13), document 1/127, forthcoming publication spring 2007.

⁹ Published in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Jahrbuch 2 2005/2006* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 97-101; it will be included in the forthcoming *Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940* (DBWE 15).

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin, 1932-1933* (DBW 12. German edition pages nos: 50-51), Letter dated February 2, 1933.

¹¹ *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), 225-29. Regarding Dohnanyi's involvement, see Winfried Meyer, *Verschwörer im KZ: Hans von Dohnanyi und die Häftlinge des 20. Juli 1944 im KZ Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1998), esp. 97.

¹² See especially Meyer, *Verschwörer im KZ*; but there is also extensive material on this in Winfried Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben*. See also Victoria Barnett, "Communications between the German Resistance, the Vatican and Protestant Ecumenical Leaders: Implications for Interpreting Bonhoeffer's Reflections on Civil Society," in *Religion im Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die Zukunftsfähigkeit des Christentums* (2002), ed. Christian Gremmels and Wolfgang Huber, 54-75.

but they must be gleaned primarily from his writings about other things, notably his reflections in his prison writings about Christianity's potential role in a post-Nazi world.

It is this third point – the issue of the anti-Judaism in Bonhoeffer's writings – that is most relevant here, since I am considering the relevance of Bonhoeffer's thought for post-Holocaust Christian theology, which has focused primarily on the critique of anti-Judaism in Christian theology and a corresponding reformulation of Christian teachings and interpretations. My reply to Yad Vashem was complicated because Bonhoeffer in this regard is an extraordinarily complicated figure. These complexities have consequences not only for how we understand Bonhoeffer, but also for our understanding of a post-Holocaust theology and the Jewish-Christian relationship. If Bonhoeffer has something to contribute to our understanding here, it can only be through a careful examination of the development of his thought in the context of his times.

But his place in the post-Holocaust conversation is also contingent, I think, on how narrowly or broadly we define post-Holocaust theology. Is post-Holocaust theology confined to the critique and eradication of anti-Judaism from Christian thought? Or – and this is my position here – does this critique of anti-Judaism necessarily go hand-in-hand with a profound rethinking of core Christian understandings of Christology and ecclesiology, and most particularly with a self-critique of our privileged understanding of the relationship between Christianity, culture, and state authority? It is important to consider this because the failures of German Protestantism under Nazism were not only due to antisemitism, but were the outcome of the very long history in German Protestantism of nationalism, subservience to state authority, and emphasis on cultural privilege, which in turn had a profound effect on how church leaders reacted theologically and ecclesiologically to Nazism. For that

reason, I would argue that a more extensive examination of Bonhoeffer's thought that includes these points, particularly the conclusions he drew in his prison writings, is crucial.

2. Central Issues

Let me begin this analysis with the central issues as I see them in Bonhoeffer's work:

A. Traditional Anti-Judaism

We must begin, of course, with the passages containing traditional Christian anti-Judaism at various points in the Bonhoeffer opus, including his later writings such as *Ethics* (1941). As Stephen Haynes notes in *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives*,¹³ it is not only the content of these statements that troubles us (e.g., statements about God's punishment of the Jews or the pejorative use of the word "Pharisee" to mean hypocrite) but their impact in their historical context. Christians in Nazi Germany, even those in the Confessing Church and even when they were disagreeing with the Nazi state on other issues, used such rhetoric to position themselves and protect themselves from the charge that they were unpatriotic or disloyal. The use of anti-Jewish language at a time of growing persecution of Jews clearly increased the vulnerability of Jews and undermined those in solidarity with them. The open affirmation by some church figures of Nazi anti-Jewish policies not only attests to the antisemitism that was widespread throughout the church, but it reminds us of why the early hagiography of the *Kirchenkampf*, in which church leaders portrayed their disputes with the nationalist *Deutsche Christen* as anti-Nazi resistance, was so misleading.

¹³ Stephen Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Post-Holocaust Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006).

Where does Bonhoeffer stand in this regard? It should be mentioned that there is actually relatively little of this language throughout the Bonhoeffer opus and it is for the most part found in theological reflections about other things. Despite the popular image of Bonhoeffer speaking out constantly against the Nazi regime and on behalf of the Jews, there are few writings in which he actually did so explicitly, and much of his written work during the 1930s (e.g., sermons, Bible studies, and notes taken by his students of his lectures) is remarkably circumspect. Most of his political statements are found in his correspondence, notably during the period in London where presumably he was freer to speak his mind.

There are also positive references to Judaism, and these, too, are striking in their historical context, an era in which most German Protestants emphasized what they saw as the irrelevance (or worse) of Jewish texts and the supersessionist rightness of Christianity over against its Jewish roots. In contrast, Bonhoeffer seemed to have an early openness to other religions. As he wrote in 1928, it was “fundamentally wrong to seek a new morality in Christianity. In actual practice, Christ offered hardly any ethical prescriptions not already attested among his contemporary Jewish rabbis or even in pagan literature ... What are we to make of other religions? Are they nothing compared to Christianity? The answer is that it is not the Christian religion itself that, as a religion, is something divine. It is itself merely one human path toward God, just as is the Buddhist and other religions, albeit, of course, of a different sort.”¹⁴ What made Christianity distinct, Bonhoeffer argued, was simply its

¹⁴ “Das Wesen des Christentums” (“The Essence of Christianity”), in *Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931* (DBW 10. German edition pages nos. 316 and 320). Translation is from the forthcoming English edition.

belief in Christ as Messiah and the consequent centrality of the incarnate and risen Christ in the world for Christians.

The only place where Bonhoeffer discussed theological understandings of Judaism at any length, however, was in the April 1933 essay “The Church and the Jewish Question” and the early drafts of the Bethel confession in the fall of 1933. Because of the ongoing debate about Bonhoeffer’s role in drafting specific passages of the Bethel confession, I will focus here on the April essay.

As previously mentioned, even in the earliest days of the Nazi regime we have the evidence that I think is characteristic both of his early opposition and his eventual move to the resistance: of a strong civil libertarian streak, unique within German Protestantism but apparently quite consistent with his upbringing and the Bonhoeffer family views. It is in “The Church and the Jewish Question” that we find these two aspects of Bonhoeffer’s thought joined: a traditional theological anti-Judaism, juxtaposed with a clear political conviction that the church must oppose the state’s measures against its Jewish citizens. The essay is filled with problematic contradictions.¹⁵ It begins with a systematic

¹⁵ In her study of Bonhoeffer and the Jews (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Kampf gegen die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden*) Christine-Ruth Müller contends that these contradictions stem from the fact that Bonhoeffer here is not expressing his own beliefs (even in the anti-Jewish passages), but simply setting up certain arguments in order to then refute them in the passages calling for church opposition to oppressive state authority. (Müller, 326) The German text can indeed be read that way, but it is worth noting that even Bethge didn’t offer this interpretation. Müller’s book is probably the most thorough documentation to date of the development of Bonhoeffer’s thought on this issue, but in my own opinion she is too quick to dismiss the significance of antisemitic statements, including those made by members of the conspiracy. The other major study is Marijke Smid, *Deutscher Protestantismus und Judentum 1932/1933* (Chr. Kaiser, 1990), which in addition to an excellent extended chapter on Bonhoeffer offers a detailed historical and theological context of German Protestant

outline of traditional Lutheran teachings about the respective roles of the church and the state, and Bonhoeffer then proceeds to write: "Without doubt one of the historical problems that must be dealt with by our government is the Jewish question, and without doubt our government is entitled to strike new paths in doing so."¹⁶ Bonhoeffer then goes on to differentiate between the legitimate and the illegitimate exercise of state authority – the latter arising when the state oppresses people and treats them unjustly. While the church, he writes, must respect its clear boundaries and not interfere with the state's exercise of its authority, it does have an obligation to speak up when that authority exceeds its legitimate bounds. In any unjust situation the church always has an "unconditional obligation toward the victims...even if they do not belong to the Christian community"¹⁷ and in extreme situations the church has the eventual obligation to resist the state. Bonhoeffer then proceeds to delineate why the "Jewish question" confronts the church with particular issues, and it is here that we encounter the familiar and troubling passages:

The conversion of Israel is to be the end of its people's sufferings. In our time, the Christian church trembles at the sight of the people Israel's history, as God's own free, terrible way with God's own people. We know that no government in the world can deal with this enigmatic people, because God has not yet finished with it. Every new attempt to "solve" the "Jewish question" comes to

attitudes toward Judaism; as the title suggests, however, this study does not go beyond 1933.

¹⁶ *Berlin: 1933* (DBW 12. German edition page no. 351). Translation is from the forthcoming English edition of this volume.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 353. Translation is from the forthcoming English edition of this volume.

grief because of the meaning of this people for salvation history, and yet one has to keep trying.¹⁸

This essay contains both traditional theological explications of the Christian understanding of the role of Jews in history – in language that dismisses the Judaic faith and is painful for us to read, particularly given the historical context in which it was written – and even (in the statement cited above) appears to defend the state's right to "deal with" the "Jewish question." At the same time it offers a radical revision of Lutheran teachings about obedience to state authority by setting the criteria for establishing when Christians can oppose illegitimate state authority.

This is the essay that gets cited in discussions about Bonhoeffer and the Jews – in fact it's often the only thing, since Bonhoeffer didn't write much else on this – and it usually is the case that either the anti-Jewish passages are cited or the ones about resistance to the state. Taken as a whole, however, the essay is a call for church intervention on behalf of the Jews, a stance that is evident elsewhere in Bonhoeffer's correspondence.¹⁹ Yet in that historical moment, the theological anti-Judaism clearly undercuts his call to help the victims and even resist the state.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 355. Translation is from the forthcoming English edition of this volume.

¹⁹ See, for example, Bonhoeffer's letter of September 11, 1934, to Erwin Sutz in which he writes about the need to finally break "with our theologically grounded reserve about whatever is being done by the state - which really only comes down to fear. 'Speak out for those who cannot speak' (Prov.31:8) - who in the church today still remembers that this is the very least the Bible asks of us in such times as these?" *London: 1933-1935* (DBWE 13, 1/147), publication forthcoming spring 2007.

Does he ever repudiate these theological judgments about Judaism? As I noted previously, not explicitly.²⁰ Among the writings that deserve the greatest scrutiny here are his bible studies and lectures to students between 1935-39, both because these years encompassed the sharp intensification of the persecution of German Jews and because it was during this period that he trained Confessing Church pastors.²¹ And as I will mention later, his wartime writings reveal a rethinking of Christianity that implicitly indicates a new relationship to Judaism.

B. The Ecumenical Network

The second central issue concerns the ecumenical network of which Bonhoeffer was part, both throughout the church struggle period of the 1930s and then during his resistance period.²² After 1939, this ecumenical network became central in the communications between different

resistance movements and in the actual rescue of Jews throughout Europe.²³ Again, whereas the popular portrayals of Bonhoeffer give him a leading role in this network, he was one among many. Yet the significance of this network, even in seemingly singular cases such as Le Chambon and the White Rose resistance (two groups often portrayed as isolated examples of resistance), is often overlooked. In 1941 Bonhoeffer and other ecumenical colleagues met in Geneva with Mayor Charles Guillon of Le Chambon to discuss visas and other means to help Jews from Le Chambon reach Switzerland.²⁴ In early 1943 Dietrich and Klaus Bonhoeffer planned to meet with the Scholls in Munich – a meeting that never took place because of the arrests and executions of the White Rose members in February 1943. This seems to have been linked to the work of Dohnanyi's office, for Josef Müller stated that he conveyed information

²⁰ The two early drafts of the Bethel confession, written in the summer of 1933, do repudiate the deicide charge very clearly. *Berlin, 1932-1933* (DBW 12. German edition pages 386 and 404).

²¹ An extensive summary of this material, which is found primarily in DBW volumes 14 (*Theological Education at Finkenwalde: 1935-1937*) and 15 (*Theological Education Underground: 1937-1940*), is beyond the scope of this essay. Documents from these volumes that deserve particular analysis in this respect, however, include the bible study of King David from October 1935 (DBW 14. German pages 878-905); Bonhoeffer's talk on "The Contemporary Significance of New Testament Texts," given to Confessing clergy in August 1935 (DBW 14. German pages 399-421); and his October 26, 1938 lecture to illegal seminarians, titled "Our Path According to the Testimony of Scripture" (DBW 15. German pages 407-31).

²² His primary contacts here included Paul Lehmann and Reinhold Niebuhr in the U.S., and ecumenical leaders throughout Europe, including Marc Boegner in France, Willem Visser 't Hooft in Geneva, George Bell in London, and Ove Ammundsen in Sweden. The role of these leaders in helping refugees and particularly in terms of their own responses to Nazi anti-Jewish measures is documented extensively in Armin Boyens' two-volume *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene*.

²³ The works that document this most extensively are Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene*; Jörgen Glenthøj, "Bonhoeffer und die Ökumene," in Bethge, ed., *Die Mündige Welt II* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1956); Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Winfried Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben and Verschwörer im KZ*; and most recently Uta Gerdes, *Ökumenische Solidarität mit christlichen und jüdischen Verfolgten: Die CIMADE in Vichy-Frankreich 1940-1944* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). Because of Bonhoeffer's ties to the German resistance figure Gertrud Staewen (and her pivotal role in several of the rescue networks), a recent biography of Staewen is worth including in this list: Marlies Flesch-Thebesius, *Zu den Aussenseitern gestellt: die Geschichte der Gertrud Staewen 1894-1987* (Berlin: Wichern Verlag, 2004).

²⁴ Bonhoeffer was in meetings with Mayor Guillon during his visits to Geneva in March and September 1941. See *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), 169, 215, and 681. In addition to the documents in DBWE 16, the World Council of Churches archives contain the minutes of a meeting in February 1941 of various people working with refugees, attended by Bonhoeffer and Guillon. (WCC, GS 42.0016. Folder 5: Cedergren. "Minutes of meeting of Ecco. Febr. 3, 1941).

about the White Rose group to Rome to be passed on to England²⁵

The debate about whether Bonhoeffer was a “rescuer” has skewed the discussion, I think, because it focuses primarily on his actual role in the Operation 7 rescue in 1941. Yet his more significant role is as one figure in this larger network, and we can trace a clear trajectory from Bonhoeffer’s early political critique of Nazism, and his call for church opposition to the Nazi state, to his subsequent involvement in the ecumenical rescue network and the German resistance.

C. Christianity in the World

The theological evidence of change that runs concurrently with this move toward resistance, however, is most evident in his reflections on the church and the nature of Christian witness and existence in ideological times. His primary theological preoccupation during this period remains what it was from the beginning of his theological work in the 1920s: the identity of the church. That’s what he wrote about throughout the 1930s, it’s what he preached about, it was the focus of his teaching to his students between 1935 and 1939. Bonhoeffer’s central point of reference was the question he posed to his times: Who is Christ for us today? And what defines the church? Bonhoeffer’s radical Christology – Christian preaching and witness for him were incarnational acts – was the means by which he detached

²⁵ The planned meeting with the White Rose group is mentioned in Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich *Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Revised and edited by Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 1010, note 284. Josef Müller, one of the few survivors of the Dohnanyi circle, mentioned Bonhoeffer’s attempt to pass this information on to England in his interview with Harold Deutsch. (Harold Deutsch papers, Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Interview dated March 24, 1966, p. 6 of transcript.)

his earthly witness as a Christian from the ideological alliances of Christendom. This was the focus of his teaching to Confessing Church seminarians.

This – the real-life, real-time emphasis on what it means to live in the world as a Christian – is what makes Bonhoeffer so important in Christian theology, and I think it’s what gives him such universal appeal, both to people exploring spirituality and to the political theologians, in a variety of countries and in very different church and theological traditions. Bonhoeffer’s emphasis to his students that they were called to follow “Christ alone,” echoing the second thesis of the Barmen declaration, was a radical declaration of Christian independence from the Nazi state and its Führer.

At the same time, this “Christ alone” is clearly an exclusivist claim that is problematic for Jews. There is no escaping the fact that Bonhoeffer’s theology and language is very internal to Christian theology. That, coupled with the anti-Judaism in some writings, makes the question of Bonhoeffer’s relevance for post-Holocaust theology an important one. Is Bonhoeffer relevant for post-Holocaust theology? If so, what does he bring to it? Does he have important insights for Christians that help us understand our religion and its practices better in the wake of the Holocaust? Does he have anything at all to say to Jews? Picking up on some of the points I just outlined, I would focus on what I think are the two most relevant aspects of Bonhoeffer’s writings for post-Holocaust Christian theology:

3. Bonhoeffer's Changed Ideas about Christian Identity and Witness

From the very beginning – and even before, because Bonhoeffer's writings on the church in the late 1920s and early 1930s set the foundation for this – Bonhoeffer was clearly concerned about the ideological costs when the church aligns itself with worldly authority or ideology. He began to argue with people like Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch in the early 1930s about nationalist and *völkisch* conceptions of Christianity.²⁶ This sets him on a clear collision course both with the *Deutsche Christen* and with the widespread support within the Protestant church for the Nazi regime.

The early hagiography of the German church struggle was flawed by the absence of any analysis of Christian antisemitism, and yet it is equally problematic to analyze this antisemitism purely as the product of theological anti-Judaism, without an analysis of how these elements converged in the German Protestantism of the 1920s and 1930s with an explicitly nationalist, *völkisch* mentality and a corresponding understanding of what it meant to be the church. The political critique of the church that did emerge in the early period after 1945 (and in Germany it was driven largely by those who had studied under Bonhoeffer) was one response to this. By focusing on the Protestant Church's alliance with state authority and power, its consequent nationalism, and hence its profound influence in helping to shape the culture that succumbed to Nazi ideology, this critique addressed these deeper ideological strains. Yet this critique led in many cases to a purely political theology that failed to address the concrete historical record of the

²⁶ This was at a 1932 ecumenical meeting in Berlin. See Glenthöj, "Bonhoeffer und die Ökumene," 140-141.

church's antisemitism. The emergence of post-Holocaust theology that explicitly confronted anti-Judaism was the corrective to this – and yet this theology, in turn, often glossed over the historical and political aspects of the Christian response to Nazism.

Yet any serious rethinking of Christianity in the wake of the Holocaust needs to address these aspects together; one is embedded in the history of the institutional church and the other in theology. Thus in addition to re-examining our theology, we need to address the identity of the church, because that is the primary form in which we act in the world. Ecclesial traditions, and an understanding of church as ally of nation and culture, were central factors in the churches' failure under Nazism.

Part of the provocative impact of James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*²⁷ was that he examined these issues in conjunction with antisemitism. Carroll, of course, focused on these issues through the lens of Catholic history, but he showed the extent to which these two aspects of Christian history – theology and ecclesiology – have been intertwined throughout the centuries. Religion is never just about belief or doctrine. Religion is always simultaneously a social construct, and theological teachings and interpretations of text constitute a form of dialogue with the social and political context in which they occur. Beginning with Constantine, Christianity and its leaders became aligned with political power, and that power was deepened by the articulation of an explicitly Christian culture and the identification of certain values with Christianity. The foil of theological anti-Judaism gave this prejudice not only political power but an even broader cultural power, which is why even after the emancipation laws in Europe Jews remained vulnerable,

²⁷ See James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001).

viewed as suspect and as “other”, and were immediately targeted in times of turmoil.

This also helps to explain the insidious staying power of antisemitism in western society, even to our present day, and I think this is one reason why it is so difficult for Christians to acknowledge the real existence of antisemitism and the role played here not only by Christian interpretations of scripture, but by Christian history and our understanding of the church. This is also why the distinction that is often drawn between antisemitism and theological anti-Judaism is so problematic. While this distinction is often defensively invoked to make a distinction between Christianity and Nazism (and, indeed, the two were not the same thing), the fact remains (and not just during the Nazi era) that Christian teachings were cited in support of violence against Jews throughout the history of Christian Europe.

This is underscored by the fact that for centuries, Christians in Europe and in this country have been the majority. Our cultural understanding as Christians, even when we are critical of our religious history and institutions, reflects this. Ninety percent of the German population in 1933 was registered with the Catholic or Protestant church. For that matter, eighty-two percent of the U.S. population today identifies itself as Christian.²⁸ Christians in western Europe and North America are accustomed to thinking as a majority, doing theology as a majority, believing as a majority, and worshipping as a majority. Inevitably, this shapes Christians’ self-understanding of their own religion as normative, as well as their approach to religious minorities.

²⁸ This figure is from page 50 of the 2002 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Americans Struggle with Religions Role at Home and Abroad”, <http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/poll2002.pdf>. Jews constitute the second largest single religious group in the United States – with one percent of the population in 2002.

Looking at this issue in a broad historical context, Carroll’s book illustrated the closely-woven interrelationship between anti-Semitism, the individual Christian sense of identity, the church’s institutional sense of identity – and the resulting sociopolitical and cultural sense of privilege. This was one reason that Nazism was able to take hold as it did, and hold the allegiance of millions of people and receive the sanction of many in the church.

This is why I believe that a post-Holocaust Christianity cannot consist only of the critique of theological anti-Judaism and the rethinking of Christian teachings about the Jews – as crucial and as central as these tasks are. The other core element has to be the analysis and challenge to presumptions about Christian culture and the right to power, because that has been our Achilles heel through the centuries, and the response of the German churches to Nazism is the case study for that.

And this is what Bonhoeffer came to understand – in a way that virtually no one else at the time, including his ecumenical colleagues, did. At the heart of his 1933 essay was his analysis about the criteria for determining what state authority is legitimate and what is not. He was very clear about the church’s obligation not only to oppose illegitimate authority (which in Bonhoeffer’s definition in this essay is authority that is unjust and oppressive) but to stop it. By virtue of its inclusion in this essay he is clearly linking this to the anti-Jewish measures.

His starting point for this critique seems to have been his strong political clarity, which is in evidence from the beginning of the Nazi regime. He recognized quite early that a Christian could not be a Nazi, a sentiment he articulated in a 1934 letter to Norwegian Bishop Ove Ammundsen: “It is precisely here, in our attitude toward the state, that we must speak out with absolute sincerity for the sake of Jesus Christ

and of the ecumenical cause. It must be made quite clear – terrifying though it is – that we are immediately faced with the decision: National Socialist or Christian.”²⁹

In turn, this political clarity shaped his theology. Particularly during his resistance activities, we can trace how his theological understanding of Christian identity was influenced by the political developments around him. Bonhoeffer’s critique of cultural and nationalist Christianity was a repudiation of the ways in which his religion had been hijacked by ideologies – nationalism, militarism, Nazism, fascism – and had made its peace with them. He understood the problems of the instrumentalization of Christianity, its alliance with power, its place in society, better than any other Christian thinker of his times and better than most since.

Bonhoeffer’s reflections on this and on the moral failure of “Christendom” became most striking during the early 1940s, when the conversation in many Christian resistance circles of Europe and the ecumenical world turned to what would be necessary for the moral reconstruction of European society after the defeat of Nazism. Virtually all these documents saw the solution of this question in some form of “rechristianization” of Europe (as an antidote to fascism and ideology) or return to explicitly “Christian” values.³⁰ The values they were upholding, of course, are naturally not confined to Christianity, and the failure of these European Christian leaders to acknowledge this, to reflect on the meaning of “rechristianization” in the context of what had

²⁹ *London 1933-1935* (DBWE 13), 1/123; publication forthcoming spring 2007.

³⁰ A detailed description of these documents goes beyond the scope of this essay, but see von Klemperer’s discussion of this in *German Resistance against Nazism*, 264-315. See also Dianne Kirby, “William Temple, Pius XII, Ecumenism, Natural Law, and the Postwar Peace,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Summer-Fall 1999): 318-39.

happened in the Holocaust, and to reflect on the explicit failures of Christianity during this period, is striking.

Bonhoeffer’s own wartime reflections on the topic of the values that would be needed in the aftermath of Nazism are in stark contrast.³¹ Bonhoeffer disagreed with the premise of these ecumenical documents, writing that the remedy to the moral havoc wreaked under Nazism could not be the rechristianization of society or the state, but a society in which Christians and their church would have to assume a new function.³² In one such example, Bonhoeffer wrote of the need for a new understanding of civil society, marked by “a possible and necessary cooperation between Christians and non-Christians in clarifying certain subjects and in advancing concrete tasks. Because of their fundamentally different foundations, the results emerging from this cooperation have the character not of the proclamation of the word of God but of responsible deliberation or demand

³¹ See Barnett, “Communications between the German Resistance”, esp. 67-71. It should be noted that the citations in this 2002 published article were from the “The Doctrine of the Primus Usus Legis” in the 1963 edition of *Ethics*. That essay is no longer in the new DBWE edition of *Ethics*, since it has been determined that it was not part of Bonhoeffer’s original *Ethics* manuscript. The essay can now be found in: *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), 584-601, and the citations here are from this more recent translation.

³² See especially his reflections on the relationship of the church to the “worldly orders” in the essay on “Personal’ and ‘Objective’ Ethics” in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), esp. 547-51. Other wartime writings that indicate his new thinking about Christianity (including explicit commentary on the ecumenical position papers about “rechristianization”) include his position paper on state and church, his review of William Paton’s *The Church and the New Order*, and his draft proposal for reorganizing the church and its constitution after the coup. These writings can be found in Part 2 of *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945*.

on the basis of human perception. This distinction must be preserved under all circumstances."³³

Bonhoeffer's central concern remained the life of Christian faith in the world, yet his understanding of Christianity had been shaken and altered by the failures of his church under Nazism. In 1942 he wrote of "a Christendom enmeshed in guilt beyond all measure"³⁴ and during the same period he wrote:

The church confesses that it has witnessed the arbitrary use of brutal force, the suffering in body and soul of countless innocent people, that it has witnessed oppression, hatred, and murder without raising its voice for the victims and without finding ways of rushing to help them. It has become guilty of the lives of the weakest and most defenseless brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.³⁵

By the time of his imprisonment Bonhoeffer had concluded that Christianity could never again be what it was. The church, he wrote, had fought under Nazism:

... only for its own preservation, as if that were an end in itself, and 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.³⁶

Does any of this, however, indicate a revision of his attitudes toward Judaism? There is no definitive answer. Bethge and others have observed that between 1939 and 1945, when Bonhoeffer was engaged in the resistance and then imprisoned, he was hardly in a position to write at length about taking a new approach to Judaism. The historical circumstances under which he was writing must indeed be taken into account. Bonhoeffer's thinking and language remain clearly Christian and his reflections here are consistent with his understanding of the incarnational nature of Christianity in the world. At the same time, his experiences had challenged every aspect of his theology, and his understanding of Christianity had changed as a result:

But we too are being thrown back again to the very beginnings of our understanding. What reconciliation and redemption mean, being born again and Holy Spirit, loving your 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.³⁷

It was during this period that he began to call for a "religionless Christianity" in "a world come of age" – a Christianity that must understand and define itself anew, in the world that had been altered by Nazism; a Christianity that has to detach itself from privilege and triumphalism.

³³ *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), 599-600.

³⁴ In his "Unfinished Draft of a Pulpit Pronouncement following the Coup", in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940-1945* (DBWE 16), 572.

³⁵ *Ethics* (DBWE 6), 139.

³⁶ From "Thoughts on the Baptism Day of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," *Widerstand und Ergebung* (DBW 8. German edition page 435. Translation is by Isabel Best, from the forthcoming English edition.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

In *Talking with Christians*, the Jewish theologian David Novak argues that Christian-Jewish dialogue needs to go beyond merely theological conversations, and that the most important form of commonality between Jews and Christians must be “the theological-political question: how faithful Jews and faithful Christians can enter into civil society and survive there intact.”³⁸ This is the central question that Bonhoeffer was exploring during the resistance and prison period. His language remains very much that of the “faithful Christian” – but the writings are those of someone struggling with the very meaning of this, of how Christians could not only remain faithful in civil society, but in a historical period in which they had profoundly compromised their faith.

4. Bonhoeffer’s Reflections on Guilt and Failure

This second factor is something that, oddly enough, has been largely overlooked in writings to date about Bonhoeffer. This may well be due to the hagiographic nature of much of what has been written about him, but – as the excerpts above indicate – a dominant theme in Bonhoeffer’s late writings is his own developing sense of guilt, of failure, and what this means not only for his life as a Christian but for his very understanding of Christianity.

Here theology and biography must be understood in conjunction with one another. This aspect of Bonhoeffer’s thought cannot be separated from what he was experiencing in the resistance, beginning in the fall of 1939. While there remains much that we may never know, it is clear that he was involved in the resistance circle that was best informed about the atrocities against the Jews on the eastern front,

³⁸ David Novak, *Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 207.

through his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi.³⁹ Bonhoeffer’s work for the resistance entailed carrying two kinds of information to ecumenical colleagues abroad: 1) this information from Dohnanyi, and 2) peace feelers for the resistance. At least one document – the 1945 memo from Harold Tittmann about his postwar conversation with Josef Mueller – suggests that one aspect of the peace feelers may have been to urge caution in what foreign church leaders said about Nazi actions, so as not to undermine the resistance plans.⁴⁰ Given Bonhoeffer’s knowledge of what the Nazis were doing, given the repeated delays and failures of the resistance to overthrow the regime (by all accounts a source of real anguish to Dohnanyi), it is clear that Bonhoeffer’s period in the resistance confronted him with difficult ethical dilemmas.

The reflections on guilt and the very viability of Christianity that permeate Bonhoeffer’s wartime writings are evidence of this. His reflections on the changed nature of ethical thought and human responsibility in history are at the heart of *Ethics*, which was written at the height of his resistance activities. His most famous reflections on these matters can be found in the short essay “After Ten Years,” written for his closest friends in the conspiracy in December 1942.⁴¹ “One may ask,” he writes here, “whether there have

³⁹ This is extensively documented in Winfried Meyer’s *Unternehmen Sieben* and especially *Verschwörer im KZ*. See also Barnett, “Communications between the German Resistance,” in *Religion im Erbe*, esp. 59-65, which include references to various archival documents that contain the reports of these atrocities.

⁴⁰ See Barnett, “Communications between the German Resistance,” in *Religion im Erbe*, esp. 59-65. A copy of the Tittmann memo is in the Myron C. Taylor papers, Library of Congress, Box 2: “Secret. For the Ambassador. June 4 1945. Memo from Tittmann.”

⁴¹ The new translation of this will appear in the forthcoming *Letters and Papers from Prison* (DBWE 8). The translation referenced here is from the translation in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972), 3 – 21.

ever before in human history been people with so little ground under their feet – people to whom every available alternative seemed equally intolerable, repugnant, and futile...The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts.”⁴² In the pages that follow he explores the consequences of this experience for how they think about faith, solidarity, good, evil, and responsibility. While his reflections in *Ethics* on these issues are more directed at the role of the Christian in society and history, in “After Ten Years” he confronted them very personally, as a Christian and citizen, asking: “Are we still of any use?”⁴³

His late writings are marked both by a continuing belief in grace as well as a profound sense of his own failings, the failing of his church and his fellow conspirators. Bonhoeffer witnessed and understood evil, he was part of and understood compromise with evil, he acknowledged his own shame and guilt. Between 1933-1945 his writings can be understood as an unfolding set of reflections on that experience and what it meant for his faith. And he nonetheless remained faithful; as he wrote on July 21, 1944 – the day after the failure of the final attempt on Hitler’s life – “it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith.”⁴⁴

5. Conclusion

Does any of this make him relevant in post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian dialogue? Is his thinking useful or interesting for Jewish scholars? Or does the combination of the theological anti-Judaism and his strong Christian focus make that impossible? I don’t know. But I personally think that Bonhoeffer’s thought is indispensable for any true post-

Holocaust Christian thought – not because of the development of his thinking on Judaism and the Jews, but because of the conclusions he drew about the changed identity of the Church, the necessity for the dismantling of cultural and political Christendom, and not least because of his own guilt and shame about the failures of his church and his country to withstand Nazi evil. He wrote about what it does to our souls to be complicit, to struggle to be good, to think differently about good and evil. His writings in their simplest form are simply the record of the development of his thinking on these issues.

This, I would argue, is his potential contribution to post-Holocaust theology. In the long run it may prove to be a minor one, less important than the work of those pioneers whose profound rethinking of the Jewish-Christian relationship is at the heart of such theology. Yet surely his reflections here are informative for Christians who seek to rethink and practice their faith in a profoundly different way in the shadow of the Holocaust, for he leaves us with some additional tools for seeing our role as Christians and as citizens in a new light. The insights he drew from his experience under Nazism can help Christians to encounter Jews and members of other faiths, not as members of a majority or dominant religion, not as people who privilege their faith as the dominant set of values for the culture or who demand ideological conformity with “Christian” values, but as people who have sinned profoundly and who accept their place in civil society as brothers and sisters (and as citizens) alongside non-Christians, and want to reflect theologically on what this means for their faith.

⁴² Ibid., 3 – 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 369.