

Sharing the Destiny of His People

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The purpose of this paper is to inquire into the significance of theology in the context of Bonhoeffer's involvement in political resistance and especially in military conspiracy against Nazi Germany. The title contains an allusion to a letter from prison to Eberhard Bethge, where Bonhoeffer reflects on this involvement.

In a playful comment, Bethge has proposed to divide Bonhoeffer's participation in the anti-Nazi opposition movement into three periods, each characterized by the letter "p": first, the "prophet" engaged in the Confessing Church, protesting publicly against the interventions of the Nazi State into church affairs; second, the "pietist" of the Finkenwalde Seminary, concentrating on meditation on the Bible; and third, the "plotter," engaged in the military conspiracy against Hitler.

It is easy to recognize both the theological and the political dimensions of the role of the "prophet," whereas — at least at first glance — the "pietist" seems to tend exclusively to theology and the "plotter" exclusively to politics. In concentrating on the third aspect of Bonhoeffer's anti-Nazi activity, that of the "plotter," I hope to show that — in contrast to what might first appear — Bonhoeffer would never have become a plotter on political grounds alone. Rather, theology played a decisive role in his particular understanding of and involvement in political resistance.

Contextualization of the Problem

"The Church and the Jewish Question" (1933)

Bonhoeffer's April 1933 address on "The Church and the Jewish Question" can be seen as his manifesto of resistance against the racist policy of the Nazi government. In view of the conservative context of church and society in which Bonhoeffer operated, the topic of this essay — the so-called "Jewish question" — seems to be rather eccentric. In the Barmen Declaration of May 1934, the foundational document of the Confessing Church, this topic would not be mentioned at all. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the manner in which Bonhoeffer treats the so-called "Jewish question" theologically is highly problematic.

It is not my purpose to report at length about the controversies which Bonhoeffer's essay has aroused among Bonhoeffer scholars during the last years. I simply want to mention one recent discussion.

At the Philadelphia Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 1995, Stephen R. Haynes tried to demonstrate that Bonhoeffer can serve as a model for Holocaust education.¹ In this context, Haynes criticized Bonhoeffer's 1933 address on "The Church and the Jewish Question" because it contained elements of obvious theological anti-Semitism. In spite of such retrospective criticism I would agree with Heinz Eberhard Tödt's view, according to which Bonhoeffer "was the only one who considered solidarity with the Jews, especially with non-Christian Jews, to be a matter of such importance as to obligate the Christian churches to risk a massive conflict with that state — a risk which could threaten their very existence."²

I mention this controversy because Haynes criticizes particularly what he calls the Christian "witness people myth" with respect to the Jews and pleads for a "normalization" of the Jewish-Christian relationship. He claims that what he calls the "witness people myth" is only the other side of the traditional teaching of contempt. This position seems

1. S. R. Haynes, "A Man for Others and for Us: Bonhoeffer and Holocaust Education." Paper given at American Academy of Religion meeting, Philadelphia, 1995.

2. Cited in Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," in John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, eds., *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches* (Toronto/Leviston: Edwin Mellen, 1981), 63.

to ignore the specific language of theology, and typifies a rather progressive or liberal political philosophy.

Unlike Haynes, I would contend that there is no possibility of “normal” Jewish-Christian relations after the Holocaust. What he calls the “witness people myth” will remain indispensable as long as the Bible has any relevance to theology, because it is closely related to the theological concept of Israel as God’s Chosen People. For Bonhoeffer, it forms the very nucleus of his theological foundation of political resistance against Nazi Germany. Haynes is right in criticizing Bonhoeffer for repeating the theological tradition of the Chosen People “bearing the curse of its deeds.”³ His alternative suggestion of “normalization” of the Jewish-Christian relationship, however, will turn out to be an illusion of liberalism.

On the grounds of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms or two realms, Bonhoeffer rejects a simplistic liberal foundation for Christian solidarity with the Jews. This is the reason he can admit to the state the right of exploring “new ways” to deal with the so-called Jewish question.⁴ And, perhaps even more disquieting: this is why Bonhoeffer maintains that — for the church — the so-called Jewish question is not a matter of “morality.” According to Bonhoeffer in 1933, the church would never criticize the state on the grounds of a “humanitarian ideal.”⁵ These disturbing formulations do not imply that, according to Bonhoeffer, there is no reason for the church to criticize the legal discrimination of the Jews. On the contrary, he is in search of a more profound basis for this criticism than “humanitarian ideals” and “moral” reasons would be in his view. And he finds this basis in theology; for the church the “Jewish question” is primarily a theological question.

Likewise, the question of how to act toward the state is a theological question for the church. And here we see Bonhoeffer exploring “new ways” of understanding the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms. In spite of the fact that the state is admitted a certain autonomy, Bonhoeffer sees three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state. “In the first place, it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate. Second, it can aid the victims of state actions. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam the spoke in

3. *GS*, vol. 1, 49.

4. *Ibid.*, 45.

5. *Ibid.*, 46.

the wheel itself." In "the Jewish problem" Bonhoeffer argues that "the first two possibilities" are "the compelling demands of the hour. The necessity of direct political action by the church," which would involve a revolutionary reinterpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, is — according to Bonhoeffer in 1933 — "to be decided . . . by an 'Evangelical Council.'"⁶

Karl Barth on "Tyrannicide" (1938)

In his essay "Rechtfertigung und Recht" (1938) Karl Barth proposed a theological justification of political resistance on the grounds of an affinity between spiritual justification and secular justice.⁷ "The phrase of the alleged equal affinity or non-affinity of any possible form of government to the gospel," Barth emphasizes, "is not only shabby but simply wrong. It is true that you can go to hell in a democracy and be redeemed under a mob rule or dictatorship. But it is not true that a Christian can affirm, wish and strive for mob rule or dictatorship as seriously as for democracy."⁸

Barth interprets the "subjection" to the will of the authorities, which Paul in Romans 13:1 allegedly demands from Christians, as simply "paying somebody the respect due to his position." This would be the self-evident other side of the "priestly service" of the Christian congregation with respect to the state, which is primarily exercised in intercessory prayers. By no means would "due respect" to the authorities have the meaning of "affirming and voluntarily supporting the intentions and enterprises of the authorities, even when these are oriented to suppress rather than protect the proclamation of the gospel of justification."⁹ In this case the Christian "respect" to the authorities would assume a "critical form."¹⁰

6. D. Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in G. B. Kelly and F. B. Nelson, eds., *A Testament to Freedom* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 139f.

7. K. Barth, "Rechtfertigung und Recht," *Theologischen Studien* 104, 2nd ed. (Zurich, 1979), 20. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer characterizes the topic as "preparing the way" for the "ultimate" within the "penultimate." *Ethics*, 133f.; cf. *Ethik, DBW*, vol. 6, 155.

8. Cf. Barth, "Rechtfertigung," 44f., note 30b.

9. *Ibid.*, 38f.

10. *Ibid.*, 40.

Barth does not, therefore, make a plea for tyrannicide, referring to the Zurich reformer Zwingli and to the *Confessio Scotica*. In Zwingli's *Schlußreden* (1523) we read that "a faithless government, which has abandoned the rule of Christ, must be *dismissed with the help of God*." And the Calvinistic *Confessio Scotica* (1560) makes it the task of the Christian "to support the life of the good people, *to oppress the tyrant*, and to defend the weak against the violence of the malicious" (44f).¹¹

Bonhoeffer probably knew Barth's essay, and it is likely that he was encouraged by it to participate in political resistance even without support by the church.¹² Yet, Barth's way of reasoning is not his. In the context of the church, which interpreted the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms in a highly conservative and authoritarian way, Bonhoeffer could not see very much sense in stressing the "affinity" between the spiritual and the secular. Even his own understanding of Romans 13 in *The Cost of Discipleship* comes across in such a traditional Lutheran and authoritarian way¹³ that in 1943 he would have no difficulty in referring to it during his trial at the *Reichskriegsgericht*. "If anyone wants to learn something of my conception of the duty of Christian obedience towards the authorities, he should read my exposition of Romans 13 in my book *The Cost of Discipleship*. The appeal to subjection to the will and the demands of authority for the sake of Christian conscience has probably seldom been expressed more strongly than there. That is my personal attitude to these questions."¹⁴

Another reason Bonhoeffer could not fully agree with Barth's conception may be seen in the political attitudes of the anti-Nazi conspirators. The majority of them were not "democratic" in a western sense or at least "democratic" only with some qualifications. Their concepts of how to reconstruct Germany after a successful *coup d'état* tended toward Romanticism and authoritarianism.

Obviously, Barth's "democratic" reasoning in favor of political resistance is — in Bonhoeffer's view — still affected by the utopian expectations of historical progress in the years immediately after World War I, when the intention was to establish a democratic administration in

11. *Ibid.*, 44f.

12. Cf. Bonhoeffer's letter to G. Leibholz (March 3, 1940) smuggled via Switzerland to Oxford, *GS*, vol. 3, 35.

13. Cf. *Nachfolge*, *DBW*, vol. 4, 256-59.

14. *LPP*, 60.

Germany for the first time. In contrast to this perspective Bonhoeffer seeks “conservative” grounds for political resistance, a foundation which would be able to save a society running self-destructively to the abyss. So we read at the end of the chapter called “Inheritance and Decay” (1940) in his *Ethics*:

Two things alone have still the power to avert the final plunge into the void. One is the miracle of a new awakening of faith, and the other is that force which the Bible calls the “restrainer,” *katechon* (2 Thess. 2:7), that is to say the force of order, equipped with great physical strength, which effectively blocks the way of those who are about to plunge into the abyss. . . . The “restrainer” is the force which takes effect within history through God’s governance of the world, and which sets due limits to evil. The “restrainer” itself is not God; it is not without guilt; but God makes use of it in order to preserve the world from destruction.¹⁵

It was not the imminent defeat of Germany which troubled Bonhoeffer most. Rather, he experienced Hitler’s military successes as a catastrophe which had to be restrained. Therefore he claimed the allied armies as “restrainers” in the biblical sense, as well as the circle of military conspirators within the German *Abwehr*. When Bonhoeffer emphasizes the difference between the “miracle of a new awakening of faith” on the one hand and the “restrainer,” who is “not without guilt” on the other, we again recognize the structure of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine in his argument.

No wonder Bonhoeffer’s “conservatism” in search of a theological foundation of political resistance provoked Barth’s “democratic” suspiciousness. As Barth informed Bonhoeffer via Charlotte von Kirschbaum, he was distrustful of “any attempt to rescue Germany by the means of further ‘national’ enterprises from its immeasurable misery.” Among these he explicitly counted “also the attempts which possibly would be made by the military generals.”¹⁶

15. *Ethics*, 108; cf. *Ethik*, DBW, vol. 6, 122f.

16. Cf. Ch. v. Kirschbaum, letter to D. Bonhoeffer (May 17, 1942), in D. Bonhoeffer, *Schweizer Korrespondenz 1941-42. Im Gespräch mit Karl Barth* (Munich, 1982), *Theologische Existenz heute*, no. 214, 18.

Political Motives in Bonhoeffer's Decision

"Patriotism" in the Moment of Decision (June 1939)

We turn to Bonhoeffer's letter from prison to Eberhard Bethge (December 22, 1943), where he reflects on his decision to return to Germany in 1939. Bonhoeffer writes:

Now I want to assure you that I haven't for a moment regretted coming back in 1939 — nor any of the consequences, either. I knew quite well what I was doing, and I acted with clear conscience. I've no wish to cross out of my life anything that has happened since, either to me personally . . . , or as regards events in general. And I regard my being kept here . . . as being involved in Germany's fate, as I was resolved to be.¹⁷

This is the phrase I have alluded to in the title of this paper, though I have translated it by "to share the destiny of his people" (instead of "being involved in Germany's fate"). The phrase may remind us of Bonhoeffer's letter to Reinhold Niebuhr on the occasion of his return to Germany in July 1939 on the eve of World War II: "I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."¹⁸

The nostalgia for Germany is obvious in this passage. But what would be the precise meaning of "sharing the destiny of Germany" even in the "trials of this time" of war? Do we see Bonhoeffer here submitting to a fate predetermined by *Vorsehung* (Providence)? Does he give way to the tide of *Volksverbundenheit* (Romantic nationalism), as Kl.-M. Kodalle has put it?¹⁹ Such an interpretation could be supported by an even more problematic phrase in Bonhoeffer's diary (June 22, 1939):

It is unbearable over here for a German; one is simply torn in two. To stay here during a catastrophe is quite inconceivable, unless it is or-

17. LPP, 174.

18. *A Testament to Freedom*, 504; GS, vol. 1, 320.

19. Kl.-M. Kodalle, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Zur Kritik seiner Theologie* (Gütersloh, 1991), 73f.

dained. But to be responsible oneself, to have to reproach oneself, for having come out unnecessarily, is certainly crushing. We cannot separate ourselves from our destiny. . . .²⁰

For Bonhoeffer, the patriot who does not leave his people alone in a “difficult period” of its “national history” — it would be easy to settle for this simplistic political portrait. But Bonhoeffer’s seemingly obvious patriotism is contradicted by some other statements.

Elements Contradicting Patriotism

It seems obvious from Bonhoeffer’s diary that the reasons for his decision to return to Germany were not as clear to him in the moment of decision as he would later pretend. In the moment of decision the motives for his return were hidden even before his own conscience. In his diary of summer 1939 we can find the traces of a painful process of decision-making. We would search in vain for traces of what he later called his “clear conscience” in that moment. On the contrary, on July 20, 1939, the day of decision, Bonhoeffer notes:

“It is remarkable how I am never quite clear about the motives for any of my decisions. Is that a sign of confusion, of inner dishonesty, or is it a sign that we are guided without our knowing, or is it both?” And then he continues:

Today the reading speaks dreadfully harshly of God’s incorruptible judgment. He certainly sees how much personal feeling, how much anxiety there is in today’s decision, however brave it may seem. The reasons one gives for an action to others and to one’s self are certainly inadequate. One can give a reason for everything. In the last resort one acts from a level which remains hidden from us. So one can only ask God to judge us and to forgive us.²¹

Only a few months later it turned out that Bonhoeffer’s decision to “share the destiny” of his people implied his participation in political resistance. Already the letter to Reinhold Niebuhr from July 1939 quoted

20. *A Testament to Freedom*, 497 (translation altered); cf. *GS*, vol. 1, 305f.

21. *Ibid.*, 496.

above reveals that Bonhoeffer was “willing the defeat” of Germany in the war. The quotation continues:

Christians in Germany will face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose; but I cannot make that choice in security. . . .²²

Even more explicit is the recollection of Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, who, during Bonhoeffer's journeys to Switzerland on the instruction of the conspiracy group within the German *Abwehr* in 1941 and 1942, repeatedly met him in Geneva. When Visser 't Hooft asked him in September 1941, “What are you praying for in the present situation?” Bonhoeffer answered: “If you want to know it, I am praying for the defeat of Germany, because I believe this is the only possibility to pay for the suffering which my country has brought upon the world.”²³

It seems to be obvious from this recollection that Bonhoeffer's political attitude (if it can be characterized as patriotic at all) implied a very special kind of patriotism—and this in obvious contrast to the attitude of other members of the resistance movement who had joined the conspiracy in order to prevent the defeat of Germany. I want to illustrate this difference by an episode from Bonhoeffer's journey to Sweden on behalf of the *Abwehr* in Spring 1942. On May 31, 1942, he met his friend, Bishop George Bell, in Sigtuna.

22. *Ibid.*, 504; GS, vol. 1, 320.

23. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, “Begegnung mit Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Das Zeugnis eines Boten. Zum Gedächtnis von Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Geneva, 1945), 7. Cf. Visser 't Hooft's note after his encounter with Bonhoeffer in Spring 1941: “Inside the Confessing Church there is a certain difference of conviction with regard to the stand which the Church should take. . . . With regard to the attitude to the war, it is generally recognized among believing Christians that a victory of their government will have the most fateful consequences for the Church. . . . On the other hand, they consider that a defeat of their country would probably mean its end as a nation. Thus many have come to believe that, whatever the outcome of it all will be, it will be an evil thing for them. One hears, however, also voices which say that after all the suffering which their country has brought upon others they almost hope for an opportunity to pay the price by suffering themselves.” Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Biographie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967), 819.

Hans Schönfeld, a member of an ecumenical research center in Geneva and cooperating with the resistance group *Kreisauer Kreis*, had come to Sweden as well in order to present a memorandum of the German opposition to George Bell. In this "Statement by a German Pastor," Schönfeld maintains that "the internal circumstances are becoming now peculiarly favourable to a coup d'état . . ." He suggests that

it would help and quicken this process toward the change of power . . . if the Allies would make it clear whether they are prepared for a European peace settlement. If otherwise the Allies insist on a fight to the finish the German opposition within the German Army is ready to go on with the war to the bitter end in spite of its wish to end the Nazi régime.

Among other ambiguous demands which, in view of the military situation, indicated the vision of a unified Europe under German hegemony, the Schönfeld "Statement" announces the readiness/willingness of the German opposition to "co-operate with all other nations for a comprehensive solution of the Jewish problem."²⁴ At a time when the so-called "final solution" of the Jewish question was already underway there was—in this perspective—a "Jewish problem" waiting for solution. Obviously this wing of the German opposition had no idea of the fact that the so-called Jewish question was primarily a German question.

In his account of the meeting, however, Bishop Bell recalls:

Here Bonhoeffer broke in. His Christian conscience, he said, was not quite at ease with Schönfeld's ideas. There must be punishment by God. We should not be worthy of such a solution. Our action must be such as the world will understand as an act of repentance. "Christians do not wish to escape repentance, or chaos, if it is God's will to bring it upon us. We must take this judgment as Christians."²⁵

It is obvious from this account that Bonhoeffer—in contrast to the major part of the opposition—does not reject the Allied demand of

24. Cf. H. Schönfeld, "Statement by a German Pastor at Stockholm (31st May 1942)," *GS*, vol. 1, 380.

25. Cf. George Bell, "The Church and the Resistance Movement" (1957), in *GS*, vol. 1, 405. Cf. also G. Bell, "The Background of the Hitler Plot" (1945), *ibid.*, 395.

“unconditional surrender.”²⁶ In view of the German guilt piling up day by day there is no time left for negotiations. Immediate action is demanded. And obviously, Bonhoeffer has no difficulty with regarding the Allied armies as well as the conspiracy group as instruments in the hand of God, helping to execute his judgment.

In Bonhoeffer’s drama fragment written during the first months of his imprisonment we find “Germany” among the besmirched terms which should be honored by silence for a time. Here we read from the dramatic persona Christoph, who can be largely identified with Bonhoeffer: “Which right-thinking man would bring himself today to utter the besmirched words Liberty, Brotherhood, even the word Germany? . . . Let us honor the great values for a time by silence, let us learn to do the right thing for a time without words.”²⁷

In this quotation we have — as the Bethges put it — “a kind of secular, political dimension of ‘arcane discipline.’” This points us to the theological dialectic of “arcane discipline” — the discipline of the secret of faith — and “doing justice among the people” in Bonhoeffer’s prison writings. In “Thoughts on the Day of Baptism” of Bonhoeffer’s grand-nephew (May 1944), Bonhoeffer writes:

Our church, which has been fighting in these years only for its self-preservation, as though that were an end in itself, is incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to humanity and the world. Our earlier words are therefore bound to lose their force and cease, and our being Christians today will be limited to two things: prayer and doing justice among the people. All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of this prayer and action.²⁸

Who would dare to tell when the time has come that the church will be able “to utter the Word of God” in a way “that the world will be changed and renewed by it” as Bonhoeffer expects? Or, by analogy: who would prophesy the day when it should be permitted to talk of “Germany” with pride again?

26. Cf. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 85.

27. Cf. *Fragments aus Tegel*, ed. Renate Bethge and Ilse Tödt, *DBW*, vol. 7 (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloh, 1994), 49.

28. *LPP*, 300.

Theological Motives

The "Brethren" of the Confessing Church

Who is this "Germany"; who are the people for whom Bonhoeffer feels responsible? Along with his reference to "Germany" in his American diary from 1939 Bonhoeffer repeatedly mentions the "brethren." So we might interpret that his sentiment of responsibility for the "brethren" of the Confessing Church is the main reason for his decision to return to Germany. This would correspond to Bethge's second "p": Bonhoeffer the "pietist," who became involved in political resistance on the grounds of solidarity with his church.

Yet the notion of "brethren" could arouse our suspicion as well. Solidarity with an oppressed church may be reason enough to honor a person as a saint, a holy man, and finally a martyr. However, this motive would be a narrowing of the original starting point of Bonhoeffer's involvement in resistance activities. This starting point was — as I have already mentioned — solidarity with the Jews. And besides that, at least according to today's linguistic conventions, the "sisters" seem to be dismissed from Bonhoeffer's ecclesiastical solidarity.²⁹

In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer attempts to reflect the experience of political resistance theologically. In contrast to the popular characterization of Bonhoeffer and his fellow resisters as "heroes of conscience," the notion of "conscience" does not play an important role in Bonhoeffer's ethical reflections. Rather, the conscience appears as an expression of the self-centered attitude of the sinner. The central concept in Bonhoeffer's reflection on his participation in anti-Nazi resistance is "responsibility." And in search of "the structures of responsible life" he develops the concept of "mandates."³⁰ It is noteworthy that Bonhoeffer counts among these "mandates" the church, the family, culture, and government;³¹ the notion of "people" or "nation" is lacking in his list. Asking how it was possible that Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the "destiny of his people" assumed such a paradoxical shape involves taking into

29. Cf. L. Siegele-Wenschkewitz, "Die Ehre der Frau, dem Manne zu dienen: Zum Frauenbild Dietrich Bonhoeffers," ed. R. Jost und V. Kubera, *Wie Theologen Frauen sehen — Von der Macht des Bildes* (Freiburg, 1993), 98ff.

30. *Ethics*, 207ff., 286ff.

31. *Ibid.*, 286.

account the “confession of guilt” which was formulated as part of his *Ethics* in 1941.

The “Confession of Guilt”

If we recall Bonhoeffer’s address “The Church and the Jewish Question,” we may realize that the most explosive point, the hope that an Evangelical Council would decide on the necessity of “direct political action” in solidarity with the Jews, had turned out to be an illusion. The Confessing Church had never felt in a position to assume responsibility for such a decision. This is the point where Bonhoeffer sees the church becoming guilty: the church has failed to accept the role of “restrainer” and “to jam a spoke in the wheel” of a disastrous history. Instead, even the Confessing Church had proclaimed that participating in Hitler’s criminal war was a “patriotic duty.”

Thus, Bonhoeffer in the course of 1941 feels compelled to formulate a “Confession of Guilt,” where we read:

The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ.³²

According to Eberhard Bethge, “there is no doubt that Bonhoeffer’s primary motivation for entering active political conspiracy was the treatment of the Jews by the Third Reich.”³³ “With this terminology, ‘the brothers of Jesus Christ’ Bonhoeffer by the very act of confessing his own and his church’s guilt enters into deep solidarity with the victims of the Holocaust; and he shows at the same time a respect, or a self-imposed restraint, towards the victims, the Jews.”³⁴

Probably at the same moment he formulated this confession of guilt Bonhoeffer inserted into his chapter “Inheritance and Decay” the fol-

32. *Ethics*, 114; cf. *Ethik, DBW*, vol. 6, 129f.

33. Eberhard Bethge, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews,” in *Ethical Responsibility*, 76.

34. *Ibid.*, 80.

lowing phrase: "An expulsion of the Jews from the West must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus was a Jew."³⁵ With the beginning of the war the problem was no longer "expulsion." It now became more and more clear that the so-called "final solution" was the extermination of the European Jews. Now each moment of hesitation to "restrain" the catastrophe would mean another moment of guilt.

We are able now to understand more precisely which "destiny of Germany" Bonhoeffer had decided to share. It is not primarily the destiny of "his people," not even solidarity with the "brethren" of the Confessing Church, which turns out to be central for Bonhoeffer's decision to return to Germany, but the destiny of the Jewish "brothers of Jesus Christ." Without a theological conception of the close relationship between the church and Israel, without the so-called "witness people myth," Bonhoeffer probably would not have been able to develop such a paradoxical form of "patriotism." "Western history is, by God's will, indissolubly linked with the people of Israel, not only genetically but in a genuine uninterrupted encounter. The Jew keeps open the question of Christ."³⁶

And in the essay "After Ten Years" he notes for his fellow conspirators in December 1942:

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing real compassion that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer. . . . The Christian is called to compassion and action not in the first place by his own sufferings, but by the sufferings of the brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.³⁷

"Compassion": Participating in the Suffering of God

After his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer's "sharing the destiny of his people" assumes primarily the form of compassion. One aspect of this compassion is political, as he writes in the "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism" of his grandnephew (May 1944):

35. *Ethics*, 90; cf. *Ethik, DBW*, vol. 6, 95.

36. *Ethics*, 89; cf. *Ethik, DBW*, vol. 6, 95.

37. *LPP*, 14. Translation slightly altered.

It will not be difficult for us to renounce our privileges, recognizing the justice of history. We may have to face events and changes that take no account of our wishes and our rights. But if so, we shall not give way to embittered and barren pride, but consciously submit to divine judgment, and so prove ourselves worthy to survive by identifying ourselves generously and unselfishly with the life of the community and the sufferings of our fellow-men. . . . "Seek the welfare of the city . . . and pray to the Lord on its behalf" (Jer. 29:7).³⁸

This identification with the life of the community is pulled from the political into the theological light in the last letter to Eberhard Bethge before the failure of the *coup d'état* (July 16-18, 1944). Now he writes on "participation in the sufferings and powerlessness of God" himself in the "secular life." Bonhoeffer interprets a line of the poem "Christians and Pagans":³⁹ "The poem . . . contains an idea that you will recognize: 'Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving'; that is what distinguishes Christians from pagans."⁴⁰

And Bonhoeffer explains this "standing by" in what follows as "participation":

It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia*: not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event, thus fulfilling now Isa. 53. . . . This being caught up into the messianic sufferings of God in Jesus Christ takes a variety of forms in the New Testament. . . . The only thing that is common to all these is their sharing in the suffering of God in Christ. That is their "faith." There is nothing of religious method here. The "religious act" is always something partial; "faith" is something whole, involving the whole of one's life. Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.⁴¹

The announced explanation of "this life" in "participation in the powerlessness of God in the world" can be found in the following letter to E. Bethge, the letter from July 21, 1944, the day after the failure of the plot

38. *Ibid.*, 299.

39. Cf. the poem "Stations on the Road to Freedom," *LPP*, 370f.

40. *Ibid.*, 361. Translation slightly altered.

41. *Ibid.*, 361f.

One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia*; and that is how one becomes a human being, a Christian.⁴²

In his "Outline for a Book" (August 1944) Bonhoeffer finds the most provocative formulation of the thought, nearly identifying Christian life with Christ himself: "Our relation to God is not a 'religious' relationship to the highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable — that is not authentic transcendence — but our relation to God is a new life in 'existence for others,' through participation in the being of Jesus."⁴³

In my view, such "existence for others" in "participation in the being of Jesus" reflects the tradition of mysticism to a problematic extent. The question might be asked whether the identification of a Christian life with the life and death of Jesus Christ would not result in excessive demands. The reason for this identification, however, seems to be the discovery that in the first place it was Christ himself who, in his suffering, identified himself with the life and sufferings of his people. This is the meaning of Bonhoeffer's remark on the "messianic event" that Isaiah 53 — the song of the suffering Servant of God — is *now* being fulfilled. Eberhard Bethge writes in his essay "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews": "Isaiah 53 is 'now' . . . fulfilled in the representative suffering of Israel for the nations. Not just in ancient times, 'then,' but 'now' in the present there is a 'life of participation in the powerlessness of God in the world.' In this way the Jews really 'keep open the question of Christ.'"⁴⁴

42. *Ibid.*, 369. Translation altered.

43. *Ibid.*, 381.

44. Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 84f.

“Operation 7”

In this context it seems appropriate to recall one of the activities of the conspiracy group, which in larger historical perspective might appear as irrelevant. I think of the so-called “Operation 7,” which simply consisted of the attempt to rescue a small number of human lives. By this conspiratorial activity in September 1942 — at a time when the mass deportations of Jews already were underway — the Bonhoeffer-Dohnanyi group within the *Abwehr* succeeded in sending a group of fourteen people of Jewish faith or Jewish descent across the Swiss border, into security camouflaged as spies of the *Abwehr*.⁴⁵

The question has been asked whether by this successful rescue activity the conspiracy group had not threatened the more important project of the plot against Hitler. A postwar correspondence between Hans Bernd Gisevius and Fritz W. Arnold, the speaker of the rescued, clarifies the theological dimension of “Operation 7”: In the beginning of 1946, Gisevius maintained that the *Ausland/Abwehr* office had been “extraordinarily unsuitable for such things.” It was “primarily in a position to prepare for the assassination attempt.” He therefore described it as “highly questionable to let oneself be diverted from this great goal by any independent action, even if the intention was well-meant.”⁴⁶ Fritz W. Arnold replied that he was convinced that “rescuing one human life — one grain of sand in an ocean of murdered — was much more important than any plot, independently of how great the goal was. . . .” In reaction to this letter Gisevius could not see any sense in continuing the correspondence, because, as he put it, Arnold was arguing in a “talmudic” way.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, Gisevius did not explain what he intended by “talmudic.” But it is clear that in his opinion this must be something even more stupid than “normal” theological thinking. However, it was such “talmudic” thinking that obviously motivated Bonhoeffer — in contrast to other members of the resistance movement, Gisevius himself included.

45. Cf. W. Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben. Eine Rettungsaktion für vom Holocaust Bedrohte aus dem Amt Ausland/Abwehr im Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (Frankfurt, 1993).

46. H. B. Gisevius, letter to Fr. W. Arnold (January 5, 1946); cited in W. Meyer, *Unternehmen Sieben*, 457f.

47. Fr. W. Arnold, letter to H. B. Gisevius (January 9, 1946); cited in *ibid.*, 590 (note 670).

It is not by chance then that "Operation 7" was one of the reasons Bonhoeffer was prosecuted and finally sentenced to death. Bonhoeffer became a martyr not simply as a political resister, but especially as a rescuer. I agree with William J. Peck, who said: "Deeds must precede words." Bonhoeffer therefore — according to Peck — "took back his sentence about the curse laid on the name of the Jews, in the only way in which he could take it back, by entering into solidarity with the victims of the Holocaust through his death."⁴⁸

The Politics of Memory

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the day of Bonhoeffer's assassination, Bishop Wolfgang Huber has recently added another political "p" to Bethge's series: Bonhoeffer, the "patriot." This characterization is remarkable, particularly in view of the fact that Bonhoeffer's participation in military conspiracy has been vehemently disputed in postwar Germany. In the 1950s and early 60s Bonhoeffer was regarded as a traitor of his nation. Even his own church, the church of Berlin-Brandenburg, in a message of July 20, 1945, felt it was necessary to condemn the plot. The church allegedly could never approve of a political plot, no matter what the purpose was. Among the people who had suffered from persecution by the Nazis were many who would never have wished for such a conspiracy. Consequently the name of Bonhoeffer was not mentioned, because for the church he was no martyr in the full sense of the word.⁴⁹

It now seems, however, that not just the German Protestant Churches but German society as a whole is ready to make peace with a person who has been honored internationally already for a long time as a representative of the "other Germany," a defender of "freedom and democracy" against totalitarianism.

It is difficult for some of us not to feel a little bit uneasy about this rapprochement. "What can . . . a past thing be rescued from?" asked the

48. William J. Peck, "Response," in *Ethical Responsibility*, 100.

49. Significantly, the judges who had sentenced Bonhoeffer to death were acquitted of guilt by the supreme court in the fifties, whereas Bonhoeffer has never been rehabilitated. This proves a certain continuity of legal institutions between Nazi Germany and the West German democracy after 1945. No Nazi judge was ever sentenced for the part he had played.

Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin. His answer is: The past has “not just to be rescued from the disrepute and disrespect it may fall into, but from a certain way of being handed down. The way it is honoured as ‘inheritance’ may be even more disastrous than oblivion ever could be.”⁵⁰ It is my suspicion that the unification of Germany has functioned as a kind of legitimization for patriotic language with respect to Bonhoeffer. I would contend, however, that his treatment as a traitor in the 1950s in Germany comes closer to the historical facts; it was in fact *as* a traitor in Nazi Germany that he proved himself a “good German,” a political resister in the full sense of the word.

A German newspaper headline, written on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Bonhoeffer’s death, reads: “A death for Germany.”⁵¹ This headline turns out to be a quotation from George Bell’s sermon in the commemorative service at Holy Trinity Church in London on July 17, 1945. But let us hear the quotation in context:

His death is a death for Germany — indeed for Europe too . . . his death, like his life, marks a fact of the deepest value in the witness of the Confessional Church. As one of a noble company of martyrs of differing traditions, he represents both the resistance of the believing soul, in the name of God, to the assault of evil, and also the moral and political revolt of the human conscience against injustice and cruelty . . . it was this passion for justice that brought him, and so many others . . . , into such close partnership with other resisters, who, though outside the Church, shared the same humanitarian and liberal ideals. . . . For him and Klaus . . . there is the resurrection from the dead; for Germany redemption and resurrection, if God pleases to lead the nation through men animated by his spirit, holy and humble and brave like him; for the Church, not only that in Germany which he loved, but the Church Universal which was greater to him than nations, the hope of a new life.⁵²

The use of Bell’s sermon to prove the alleged “patriotism” of Bonhoeffer seems to me highly questionable. More precisely, in my opinion, simply quoting the “patriotic” beginning of this sermon and

50. Walter Benjamin, *GS*, vol. 1, 1242. Cf. W. Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk,” *GS*, vol. 5, 591: “Es gibt eine Überlieferung, die Katastrophe ist.”

51. Klaus von Dohnanyi, in *Die Zeit*, April 9, 1995.

52. Cited in Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 1041f.

ignoring its ecumenical perspective constitutes an improper political use of this sermon. If we may find elements of patriotism in Bonhoeffer's decision, these have nothing to do with what is usually understood by this term. In order to avoid political instrumentalization and other misrepresentations we should rather abstain from using the unclear expression at all to characterize Bonhoeffer's attitude. His unusual theological "patriotism" includes elements such as solidarity with the Jews and high treason against the political administration, which, at least in Germany, have never before been associated with patriotism.