



Dietrich Bonhoeffer— Pastor and Theologian of Word and World

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In 1981, as I was nearing completion of an MTh thesis on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's understanding of the *disciplina arcani* (discipline of the secret), my advisor, James Burtness, the first editor of *Word & World*, told me that the journal's chosen title was inspired by words from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*: "I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God."¹ Out of this concern for incarnational theology and ministry, *Word & World* was born. "[T]he Word is always in, with, and under the world...the Word comes to us through worldly *means*."²

Since that first issue of *Word & World* appeared in the winter of 1981, the literary legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which had been held by his friend and later biographer, Eberhard Bethge, has been organized and edited. Most important, the sixteen-volume German *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, completed in 1998 (with subsequent *Jahrbuch* updates), is being translated/edited/published by Fortress Press, in cooperation with the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition board of the

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 55.

²James H. Burtness, "The Word for the World," *Word & World* 1/1 (1981) 4.

"Christian martyr" and "Righteous Gentile" have both been disputed as appropriate titles for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born one hundred years ago this year. Undisputed is his incarnational theology, always tying together word and world—a legacy brought to this journal by its first editor, James Burtness (1928–2006), a Bonhoeffer scholar whose recent death we mourn and whose work we continue to treasure.

International Bonhoeffer Society—English Language Section.³ Further, a recent edition of Bethge’s definitive biography, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*,⁴ as well as an excellent documentary film, *Bonhoeffer*,⁵ place before the public outstanding resources for capturing the essence of Bonhoeffer’s life and theology. In 1998 an international bibliography was published, which catalogued every known resource by or about Dietrich Bonhoeffer;⁶ an annual English-language update of that bibliography is included in each winter edition of the *Newsletter* of The International Bonhoeffer Society—English Language Section. Of course, the popularization of Bonhoeffer, beginning in the 1960s, also produced representations that were not entirely accurate nor particularly helpful.

In the following pages, I will discuss Bonhoeffer’s “life and death” witness using two primary designations: Christian martyr and Righteous Gentile. The first designation, Christian martyr, is important—and controversial—in the Christian community, while the second, Righteous Gentile, is important—and controversial—in the Jewish community. Both designations offer the possibility of assisting Christians and Jews to better understand the intimate and dynamic relationship between God and humanity, the sacred and the secular, the word and the world.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AS CHRISTIAN MARTYR

It was a once-in-a-lifetime honor for my wife and me to be present at Westminster Abbey in London on July 8, 1998, for the unveiling and dedication of ten statues of twentieth-century Christian martyrs that now stand above the west entrance of that historic edifice. Included in that group of statues honoring persons from most every continent was one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The intensely moving worship experience inside the church, attended by relatives and associates of the martyrs being recognized, with Queen Elizabeth, Prince Philip, and the Archbishop of Canterbury present, was far removed in kilometers and spirit from Berlin-Brandenburg, where on July 21, 1945, his own church “presented Paul Schneider to its congregation as ‘a martyr in the full sense of the word’ and did not mention Bonhoeffer’s name, but said it could never approve of the conspiracy of July 20, 1944, whatever the intention behind it might have been.”⁷ To the contrary, those persons determining who should be honored at Westminster Abbey did understand Bonhoeffer’s life, ambiguous and complex as it was, to represent true Christian martyrdom.⁸

³Information about the Society can be found at www.dbonhoeffer.org (accessed 26 March 2006).

⁴Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

⁵*Bonhoeffer*, prod. and dir. Martin Doblmeier, Journey Films (2003).

⁶*Internationale Bibliographie zu Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Ernst Feil (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher, 1998).

⁷Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 931.

⁸Andrew Chandler, ed., *The Terrible Alternative: Christian Martyrdom in the Twentieth Century* (London: Cassell, 1998). This book chronicles the lives of each of the ten martyrs selected for placement at Westminster Abbey and the reasons for their inclusion. An excellent introduction by Chandler explains the complexity of Christian martyrdom in modern times.

It would perhaps be easy to criticize those church leaders gathered in 1945 to recognize Paul Schneider and not Dietrich Bonhoeffer for their narrow view of Christian martyrdom, hoping that, with the unfolding of time, such recognition for Bonhoeffer would surely happen. However, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* includes under “Lesser Festivals and Commemorations” for April 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer—as “teacher.”⁹ Martin Luther King Jr. (January 15), Erik, King of Sweden (May 18), Justin of Rome (June 1), and Ignatius of Antioch (October 17), to name just four, are designated martyrs in the same list, while Dietrich Bonhoeffer (April 9) is called “teacher.” Apparently in 1978 the issue of Bonhoeffer’s witness (martyr or not?) was still being discussed.¹⁰

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In question seems to be the “purity” of witness to Jesus Christ. Beginning in the second century, following the New Testament period when the term martyr could refer to anyone bearing witness to Jesus Christ in death or in life, the designation of martyr has been reserved for those who explicitly, unambiguously, and purely *died* for witnessing to Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered on April 9, 1945, for his faith in and faithfulness to Jesus Christ, expressed “in, with, and under” his association with those plotting the death of Adolf Hitler. Implicitly, the love of God—in Christ and for humanity—motivated his solidarity with the Jews and his offering of self to assist in ending the Nazi reign of terror; explicitly, the cover used when offering himself to express such faith was his secular employment with the *Abwehr* (German military intelligence). Unambiguously, his disenchantment with and separation from the Confessing Church and his subsequent association with the conspirators was in obedience to Jesus Christ; ambiguously, he could be questioned for affiliating with those doing the “dirty work” of tyrannicide (i.e., murder).¹¹ Pure was the quality of Bonhoeffer’s inner faith and confession (observed in his prison reflections, even though obfuscated and clandestine); polluted were his final words meant to deceive the deceivers.

To suggest that the concept of martyrdom be expanded to include Christian witness under implicit, ambiguous, and polluted words and deeds is to recognize that, at times, the truth needing witness may be concealed in, with, and under oth-

⁹*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 10.

¹⁰For an excellent study on Christian martyrdom, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s fitness for such a designation, see Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004).

¹¹Although Bonhoeffer was actively involved in the formation of the Bekennende Kirche (Confessing Church) in 1934 and directed one of its five seminaries (1935–1937), he became increasingly disenchanted with its lack of boldness in declaring solidarity with the victims of the Nazi regime. He saw the Confessing Church become more and more preoccupied with its own institutional survival, less and less with being the body of Christ in the world.

erwise questionable realities. After all, Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking and acting as a Christian witness during a Memphis garbage strike when he was murdered. Were not the circumstances of King's death explicitly political, ambiguously "legal," and seen by some as polluted patriotically? Implicit faith, ambiguous circumstances, and polluted associations at times are the raw materials of authentic Christian witness, true Christian martyrdom. Purity of confession is not always possible, nor very wise.

At the surface, these newer martyrs of the church seem to die for reasons only loosely connected to the Christian faith....The lives and deaths of these newer martyrs call for a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of martyrdom and its relation to social responsibility and Christian commitment....As a collision of kingdoms, martyrdom is, and has always been, rife with political overtones. And as contemporary martyrs have shown, seldom is it "neat around the edges."¹²

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words from prison can assist Christian ministry and vocation by reminding the church that in, with, and under the world—with all its ambiguity and brokenness—the word, the reality of God's presence, heals and redeems:

Faith is participation in this being of Jesus (incarnation, cross, and resurrection).¹³

By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.¹⁴

In, with, and under human lies, deception, and attempted tyrannicide, the redeeming presence of God—in Jesus Christ—was at work, as the conspirators, supported and assisted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, attempted to rescue humanity from the death grip of Adolf Hitler. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian martyr because he died as a witness to the reality of God in Jesus Christ in a place where God and humanity, the sacred and the secular, the word and the world were meeting.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AS RIGHTEOUS GENTILE

While engaged in study at the International Center for Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem at Yad Vashem in 1992, I often walked down the Avenue of the Righteous, a boulevard created to recognize non-Jews who, at risk to their own lives, saved at least one Jew during the Holocaust. Such names as Oskar Schindler and Raoul Wallenberg appear there. I was aware that six years earlier the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been nominated, but rejected, for recognition on this avenue. At that time I did not know why. Subsequently, it has become clear that Bonhoeffer's nonrecognition as a Righteous Gentile (specifically called "Righteous

¹²Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr*, 12, 248.

¹³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 381.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 370.

among the Nations”) at Yad Vashem has some similarities to his nonrecognition as a martyr by some Christians. How so?

Stephen Wise, an attorney from Connecticut, who knew that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was rejected for the title “Righteous among the Nations,” took on the challenge of resubmitting Bonhoeffer’s nomination.¹⁵ Wise is convinced that Bonhoeffer does meet the criteria of Yad Vashem for this honorable designation and has labored intensely for nearly a decade to convince the committee. He has gathered significant documentation to show that Bonhoeffer “at risk to his life saved at least one Jew.” To date, Yad Vashem has refused this recognition for Bonhoeffer, a refusal that Wise believes is “political and prejudiced.” Yet, in October 2003, Yad Vashem did recognize Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi for his rescue of Jews, an *Abwehr* activity in which Bonhoeffer was also involved.¹⁶ So why would Yad Vashem recognize von Dohnanyi and refuse to recognize Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

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Mortecai Paldiel, director of the Program for the Righteous, is no doubt aware of Bonhoeffer’s statements in the early 1930s about Jews and Judaism. Bonhoeffer did, in fact, early in his career write words reflecting Christianity’s traditional supersessionist theology.¹⁷ He was not immune from beliefs maintained over centuries about the relation between Judaism and Christianity. However, and this is most significant, Bonhoeffer never came close to endorsing the racist anti-Semitism of the Nazis. His life would later be ended because of his solidarity with the “brethren of Jesus,” the Jews. Significantly, one of Bonhoeffer’s best friends from 1929 on was Franz Hildebrandt, a Lutheran pastor whose mother was Jewish. Further, Bonhoeffer’s twin sister, Sabine, married a Jew, Gerhard Leibholz, and that relationship would eventually result in their 1938 immigration to England. These personal factors no doubt reinforced Bonhoeffer’s innate aversion to any propaganda of the Nazis that spoke of Jewish inferiority or subhuman status. His earlier theological statements about salvation in Christ for Jews was strictly theo-

¹⁵Stephen A. Wise, “Why isn’t Bonhoeffer honored at Yad Vashem?” *Christian Century*, 25 February 1998, 202–204. Interestingly, Wise’s grandfather, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who organized the American Jewish Congress and then was president of the World Jewish Congress from its inception in 1936 until his death, was responsible for alerting President Roosevelt, through a telegram of Gerhart Riegner on 8 August 1942, of the extent of the genocide then occurring in Europe. See also Marilyn Henry, “Who, exactly, is a Righteous Gentile?” *Jerusalem Post*, 29 April 1998. Online at: www.dbonhoeffer.org/node/27 (accessed 12 April 2006).

¹⁶For this information, search on “Hans von Dohnanyi” at www1.yadvashem.org/search/index_search.htm (accessed 12 April 2006).

¹⁷“Supersessionism” is a term used to express the belief of some Christians that a new and better covenant made by God with humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has replaced (superseded) the earlier, outdated covenant God made with Israel. Most mainline churches have rejected this belief.

logical and never racist, eliminationist, or arrogant. Paldiel, in my opinion, chooses to ignore or deny the documented facts of Bonhoeffer's rescue efforts for Jews, at the risk of his own life, because of his (Paldiel's) disappointment with Bonhoeffer's earlier statements about Jews and Judaism.¹⁸ Stephen Wise has reminded Yad Vashem of its criteria for recognizing "Righteous Gentiles," criteria in which motivations, attitudes, and earlier beliefs are not relevant, only actual rescue efforts. Because of this inconsistency in following their criteria, Wise believes Bonhoeffer's case is being blackballed. At issue for Paldiel seems to be the impurity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's earlier beliefs, thus leading to the refusal of the "righteous" category.* Ironically, Yad Vashem did overlook the impure motivations, attitudes, and earlier beliefs of an Oskar Schindler, choosing to focus simply on his actual rescue of Jews. As the film *Schindler's List* so poignantly shows, Schindler's motivations for sheltering Jews were primarily selfish and entrepreneurial. Yes, Bonhoeffer—at risk to his life—assisted some Jews in escaping Nazi Germany; no, he was not sinless, nor without thoughts and words that he would later regret.

In what way might Bonhoeffer's life and death witness assist Jews in better grasping the intimate and dynamic relationship of God and humanity, the sacred and the secular, the word and the world? One key to greater understanding might lie in the word used in Yad Vashem's program: righteous. To be sure, the Hebrew phrase for "Righteous among the Nations" is *hasidei ummot ha-olam*, that is, the "righteous" person is a *hasid* (saint) rather than a *tsaddiq* (righteous one). Still, the biblical understanding of "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*) might be helpful here, especially since that is the term chosen by Yad Vashem in their English version of the title. Biblically, "righteousness" has the basic meaning of meeting "certain claims which another has on [one] in virtue of relationship."¹⁹ There is no singular criterion for righteous action; there is no absolute, objective expression or experience of truth. "Righteousness is in the OT the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that be with men or God....When God or man fulfills the conditions imposed upon him by a relationship, he is, in OT terms, righteous."²⁰ So it would seem that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was living and dying for "righteousness," precisely because he acted responsibly for others given his particular situation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer acted on a premise shared by persons of conscience near the center of Nazi power (in 1938 and following) that only the death of Adolf Hitler could end

¹⁸See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, vol. 12, *Berlin 1932–1933* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher, 1997) 349–358, esp. 354–355. See also Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," in *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches*, ed. John Godsey and Geoffrey Kelly (New York: E. Mellen, 1982) 43–96.

*Editor's note: Though see Yad Vashem's argument that Bonhoeffer does not meet their criteria at www1.yadvashem.org/search/index_search.htm (accessed 12 April 2006). Search at the site under "Dietrich Bonhoeffer."

¹⁹Gottlob Schrenk, "Righteousness in the LXX," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 195.

²⁰Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the Old Testament," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 80.

the existing genocide. On that premise, in trust of God and love of humanity (especially Jewish victims), Bonhoeffer used his knowledge, relationships, and energy to assist the officers' plot against Hitler's life, culminating on July 20, 1944.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer would likely resist such recognition as granted by Yad Vashem for “Righteous Gentiles,” because he would have perceived his action as simply necessary and responsible, nothing particularly heroic. Yet, it seems important and even necessary for us to discuss his case, because our righteousness (i.e., our faith relationship with God and our ethical relationship with others) may well involve explicit, ambiguous, and polluted life activities as we live out our implicit, unambiguous, and pure trust in God. If Bonhoeffer, who struggled so intensely to know who Jesus Christ really is for us today, cannot be seen as a “righteous one,” who ever can? Whose life and witness will ever be unambiguous and pure? Lutheran Christians (among others) confess humanity's state of being *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time justified and sinful); Jews also believe that righteousness in relationships necessarily involves ambiguity and imperfection. Much more is at stake here than a plaque for Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Yad Vashem's “Avenue of the Righteous.” The very essence of *righteousness* for Jews as well as authentic witness (*martyrdom*) for Christians involves a dynamic and relational understanding of God and humanity, the sacred and the secular, the word and the world.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AS PASTOR AND THEOLOGIAN OF WORD AND WORLD

The Christian martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on that cool April morning in 1945 did not outwardly resemble the martyrdoms of St. Peter, Justin, or Oscar Romero, yet martyrdom it was, for his life in, with, and under *Abwehr* disguise was the meeting of God's word and God's world. The righteousness of this Gentile was clandestinely lived as he traveled for military intelligence to inform the world of the justice sought by those few who were ready to sacrifice their lives for others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not a perfect human being, for there is no such one. However, he was a Christian martyr as he authentically bore witness to Jesus Christ; he was a “Righteous Gentile” because he fulfilled the demands of relationship. In these ways, he can assist us—in discipleship and ministry—as we live in the word and in the world, always connected and never separated.

While Dietrich Bonhoeffer's witness to Jesus Christ is clearly of a higher profile than most Christians will ever experience, the meeting of word and world as the nexus of his Christian discipleship is very much like that of all others. It is in the ordinary stations of life's responsibilities that the reality of God and the reality of the

world meet. Martin Luther was keen on emphasizing that Christian life is experienced and expressed in family, vocation, and civic community; in the mundane, yet marvelous, places of our world, God's word is incarnate in the actions of God's people. For ministry, this implies concrete engagement in the ordinary, routine, and periodically chaotic places of the world. Any evasion of secular responsibility in the name of faith becomes unfaithfulness. To learn from Bonhoeffer's life and death witness means to understand that no place in God's created realm is outside the presence of God and the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. The world with all its beauty and brokenness is the place humans encounter God; in, with, and under life's sights and sounds, pains and pleasures, successes and failures, we meet the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord Jesus Christ. "I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the midst of twentieth-century Nazi Germany.²¹ We live in a much different time than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but it is the same world—created, loved, and redeemed by God in Jesus Christ—in which Jesus Christ wills to meet us every day in every place. ⊕

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²¹Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 55.