

Introduction—Whose Bonhoeffer?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. His *Life Together* and *Discipleship* are considered to be spiritual classics, and few theological works have made as much of an impact as *Letters and Papers from Prison* upon publication. Although far from uncontroversial, it is also clear that Bonhoeffer's involvement in the German resistance has also been a significant factor in his appreciation.

But who actually is this Bonhoeffer? After 70 years of scholarship, have we finally figured him out? Until relatively recently, Eberhard Bethge's magisterial work, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, had been the authoritative version of events and, in many ways, it still is. Who could be better placed to comment on Bonhoeffer's identity than someone who knew him intimately as a teacher, theologian, pastor, friend, and relative? However, the last few years have seen published a variety of new biographies, such as Ferdinand Schlingensiepen's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 1906–1945* (2006), and Charles Marsh's *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (2014). With access to new sources and archives, as well as a broader understanding of the context into which Bonhoeffer was writing, such works have sought to update and alter Bonhoeffer's image. Bethge's own work has undergone six editions since its publication in 1967, and in his foreword to the fifth edition in 1983, Bethge himself wondered whether a more up-to-date image was required.

The last few years have also seen more revisionist biographical

sketches. When in the late 1980s, Georg Huntemann had sought to translate Bonhoeffer for evangelicals in his *The Other Bonhoeffer: An Evangelical Reassessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1989), so twenty years later Eric Metaxas proclaimed Bonhoeffer to be a conservative evangelical in his hugely popular but controversial *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (2010). More recently, critical scholarship has challenged Bonhoeffer's perceived involvement in the German resistance, such as *Bonhoeffer the Assassin: Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking* (2013) by Nation, Siegrist, and Umbel, with a foreword by Stanley Hauerwas, and Sifton and Stern's *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi, Resisters Against Hitler in Church and State* (2013).

In order to gain a firmer footing on Bonhoeffer's image, important research has been done to establish Bonhoeffer's heritage and the influences that were particularly significant in sculpting his thought. Early contributions included Andreas Pangritz's *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (1989) and Ralf K. Wüstenberg's *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (1998), which presented Bonhoeffer's prison theology through the influence of William Dilthey. More recently, however, Bonhoeffer scholarship has seen an important overview in Peter Frick's *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation* (2008), Michael P. deJonge's *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation* (2012), which viewed Bonhoeffer's early work through his relationship to Barth and Luther, and my own *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age* (2011), which considered the strong influence of Søren Kierkegaard throughout Bonhoeffer's work.

Such work has laid an important foundation from which to understand many of the themes and concepts that run throughout Bonhoeffer's work. However, Bonhoeffer scholarship faces a number of difficulties. The first concerns the way in which Bonhoeffer wrote. Bonhoeffer was utterly absorbed in his context. As many of the chapters in this volume make clear, part of Bonhoeffer's attraction is that he was only interested in what was "concrete"—he presented a theology that did not so much reject metaphysics, as seek to bind

everything to “reality” in Christ. Bonhoeffer, therefore, never wrote for some abstract audience, but always spoke to real people, whether to students, pastors, ecumenists, resistance fighters, politicians, or even the German people within a historical context. Bonhoeffer was always responding to what was going on around him. Consequently, while individual themes can be seen developing throughout Bonhoeffer’s thought, it can be difficult to piece together a systematic whole as individual elements of his work are given their own distinctive direction. If we look at Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics*, by way of example, each of the manuscripts was written at a different time and place, and not in the order Bonhoeffer finally suggested they should appear. As the editors of the German Edition of DBW 5 make clear, each of the chapters is responding to the context into which it is written and, “During the less than three years of Bonhoeffer’s work on the *Ethics*, Germany’s situation changed with breathtaking speed.”¹ Consequently, the editors have had to make the difficult decision to place the chapters in the chronological order of their writing to demonstrate how Bonhoeffer’s thought was developing in each period, rather than to show how his argument was intended to build once the book was complete.

This brings us to a second issue that significantly complicates understanding who Bonhoeffer is: Some of Bonhoeffer’s work has been lost, left incomplete, or we only have it indirectly. In terms of Bonhoeffer’s provocative prison theology, for instance, we know that a wide variety of letters have gone missing and that Bethge destroyed a whole batch before his arrest in October 1944—letters which were written during one of Bonhoeffer’s perhaps most provocative and creative periods. We are left to wonder whether these contained more directive descriptions of “unconscious Christianity” or the “non-religious interpretation of biblical concepts,” both of which have proven such fertile concepts for later thinkers. Equally, if we turn again to *Ethics*, we are missing one entire chapter on “The Good,” which would have been central in tying many of the themes together, and

1. DBWE 6, 420.

clarifying his understanding of such terms as “ethics,” “the good,” “reality,” and what it may mean to be truly “human” within the world. Finally, although Bonhoeffer published *Creation and Fall*, we lack complete manuscripts of many of the other lecture series from the same period at the University of Berlin, delivered at a turning point in the lives of both Germany and Bonhoeffer himself. Some of the lecture outlines are provocative and tantalizing. And some, such as the influential lectures on Christology, have been painstakingly pieced together from the comprehensive notes taken by his dedicated students. However, while extremely helpful resources, readers of *Christology* (1966), *Christ the Centre* (1978), or its replication in DBWE 8, will get a slightly different feel depending on both the translation and editorial work.

A final important issue also concerns the environment in which Bonhoeffer wrote. Bonhoeffer was an academic who thrived in discussing theology with his peers and the wider academic community. Some of the most moving accounts of Bonhoeffer’s life come from figures such as Paul Lehmann and Erwin Sutz who describe the fellowship and openness they shared around their theological discussions as students together in New York. And this would become most fully manifest in Bonhoeffer’s deep fellowship with Bethge in his prison letters—an engagement that was crucial for the development of Bonhoeffer’s burgeoning ideas. Despite recognising the profound importance of this theological fellowship, Bonhoeffer was invariably unable to engage in the discussions that academics take for granted today, but which are essential for properly locating ones ideas within the wider theological landscape, and to edit and reforge them in the light of proper critique. This in no way diminishes Bonhoeffer’s thought. However, it does create difficulties when we try to draw Bonhoeffer into highly developed debates, with thinkers who are discussing concepts in far more abstract terms. Again, this is not to undermine Bonhoeffer’s work as less than academic or rigorously untested but to demonstrate that to take Bonhoeffer’s thought seriously is not just to take it at face value in terms of how it was

expressed, but equally to consider what he might have said to this thinker or critique, how he might have used his work to answer this or that question, or how he might have overcome apparent inconsistencies within his work, or shown their full implications.

These difficulties may be a matter of sadness and frustration for some. And, unfortunately, the accusation of Bonhoeffer's work as "fragmentary" leads some to dismiss their value outright. However, it is precisely these difficulties that have led to Bonhoeffer's profound and far-reaching influence. Bonhoeffer's provocative, creative, probing, and yet sometimes incomplete thoughts and questions have been the inspiration behind many other significant thinkers. The fact that Bonhoeffer's theology is neither entirely systematized nor conclusive—"locked down" might be an appropriate expression—has meant that it has been able to speak into a wide variety of situations and led in a plethora of directions. Consequently, writers who would not normally be considered together, either because of their discipline or their individual views, have found themselves engaging with Bonhoeffer, even perhaps over the same passages, and finding there fertile ground for their own thoughts and concerns. Whether such thinkers are faithful to Bonhoeffer's overall theology, or simply concerned with a single concept, their own development has been helped through their engagement with Bonhoeffer.

It is here that we find the purpose behind this current volume. In the chapters that follow, leading international scholars discuss and critically interact with the way in which a variety of significant figures have engaged with Bonhoeffer's thought since his death. The aim of the volume is threefold. First, the following discussions demonstrate the profound and ongoing influence of this most extraordinary of theologians and Christians. Second, the volume is important for those interested in gaining a greater understanding of these other figures and movements. As discussed above, through discerning influences one gains a greater understanding of the background of an individual's thought, but also a potential hermeneutical tool through which to discern a thinker's interests and orientations, as well as the ways in

which specific terms and concepts are used by that thinker. Third, the essays offer invaluable insights into how Bonhoeffer might be interpreted. The aim of the project is not simply to focus on “influence” but rather “engagement.” The point is not to see Bonhoeffer as the ‘giver’ whose work we are to discern in these other figures, but rather to demonstrate the importance of this far more dynamic relationship.

When we consider the difficulties of interpreting Bonhoeffer, as described above, and in particular the contextual and unfinished nature of much of his work, it is extremely valuable to bring Bonhoeffer’s work into new situations, to answer new questions that were beyond his own horizon, and to consider potential trajectories for his work. In the following chapters, some of the most significant thinkers and movements of the last seventy years are allowed to draw Bonhoeffer into their own context, to help answer the profound and penetrating questions they themselves were faced with. As part of this dynamic relationship, the volume also takes seriously the importance of critique. This project is not designed to be simply hagiographic towards Bonhoeffer, but to recognise the value in how other thinkers have questioned and disagreed with Bonhoeffer’s work. This may take the form of direct and conscious critique, or occur indirectly in the way a specific Bonhoefferian theme is used to ignite an idea but not to direct its continued path or trajectory.

When we consider this final aim, we are not simply concerned with trying to understand whether Bonhoeffer’s work stands up to new questions or situations—although that certainly is relevant. It is also to consider how Bonhoeffer might have responded and applied, altered, or even perhaps discarded some of his ideas. With those concepts that Bonhoeffer left tantalisingly unfinished, such as the birth of a world come of age, a religionless Christianity, or even unconscious Christians, we may also use these engagements to consider how he might have continued his thought.

When we reflect again on the question, “Whose Bonhoeffer?” the above discussion has not sought to suggest that all images are equal,

or even justified. In the current volume, the representations by the radical theologians and Joseph Fletcher are particularly problematic. However, what is demonstrated is that through even the most provocative of engagements we come to learn more about Bonhoeffer and how his theology might be interpreted and consequences drawn. Whether one appreciates the answer they give, the questions our interlocutors ask of Bonhoeffer are penetrating and require often nuanced and perceptive answers that develop and extend our current image of this extraordinary thinker. This is true even of those discussions that are more historically rooted—such as concerning the death of God theologians or the “new morality,” which found their fuel in the 1960s but were generally extinguished within a few decades. While they offer important insight into the history of theology, as the chapters make clear, the questions they asked of Bonhoeffer’s work remain pertinent and helpful towards our interpretation of his work today.

A handful of other collections have also dealt with the issue of Bonhoeffer’s influence, which are worth mentioning here. Two early volumes, compiled from papers presented at International Bonhoeffer Congresses, are *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer’s Legacy to the Churches* (1982) and *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* (1996). In both we find discussion of Bonhoeffer’s impact and reception in areas such as South Korea, South Africa, East Germany, South America, the ecumenical movement, and the third world more generally. In *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon* (2009), Stephen Haynes presents a variety of different portraits of Bonhoeffer which offer a broad survey of the way in which Bonhoeffer has been engaged with. Martin E. Marty has also touched upon the different ways in which Bonhoeffer’s prison theology has been discussed in his fascinating, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison: A Biography* (2011). Most recently, Clifford J. Green and Guy C. Carter have edited an important volume on how to read Bonhoeffer—*Interpreting Bonhoeffer: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (2013)—which offers, in its opening section, an overview of

Bonhoeffer reception in Britain, America, Japan, South Africa, Brazil, and the “Three Germanys.”

The current volume presents a more focused analysis of individual thinkers and movements, rather than a broader or more geographical perspective. The above volumes, however, make an invaluable contribution to the way we understand Bonhoeffer’s reception more generally, and act as an extremely helpful background to the current work which will, invariably, root its thinkers in their historical and cultural settings. This volume is, however, not exhaustive. There are many other figures that could have been drawn upon but which, sadly, could not fit into a single volume such as this. To the list might have been added such figures as Helmut Thielicke, John Zizioulas, Jacques Ellul, John Macquarrie, David Ford, W. H. Auden, Rene Girard, Gianni Vattimo, Desmond Tutu and Ubuntu Theology, or Martin Luther King Jr. One can only hope that another volume might appear to do such figures justice. However, the current work is also not exhaustive in terms of the content it does provide. The authors have succeeded in drawing on a significant amount of material in the space they were allotted. However, although the chapters offer substantial analysis and contributions, it is also hoped that they will provide inspiration and a foundation for others to continue their research.

Before finishing, it is important to touch upon the issue of “influence” and its difficulties. Establishing influence can be an extremely complex and subjective task. Although some of the figures discussed here are all too happy to describe their relationship to Bonhoeffer, others show his influence far more implicitly. Beyond the direct intentions of these figures, therefore, the authors have also had to contend with what Harold Bloom has called, in his seminal work of the same name, the “anxiety of influence.” Under the pressure of producing original work, Bloom argues that writers may often ignore or be extremely critical towards their influences. While one cannot charge our present figures with academic parricide, Bloom’s analysis reveals the difficulties any conclusive analysis of influence or engagement can face. In the proceeding chapters, therefore, the

authors will draw upon both explicit and implicit evidence to point towards Bonhoeffer's influence. Not every piece will necessarily convince everyone. However, the authors' careful and critical analyses go a significant way to show the extraordinary impact that Bonhoeffer's life and thought has had, and continues to have, since his untimely death.

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