

*Responses to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Three Germanys*

Wolfgang Huber

## A. BONHOEFFER AND PUBLIC ETHICS IN SIX NATIONS, 1945–2010

INTRODUCTION: BONHOEFFER'S INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC  
ETHICS—GERMAN OR INTERNATIONAL?

I have been invited to present the German case for the influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on public ethics. As a German myself, I may seem an obvious choice to interpret Bonhoeffer's influence from a German perspective. But there is an enormous difference between Bonhoeffer's time, ending in 1945, and the later contexts of the responses to his life and work. It is true that Dietrich Bonhoeffer cannot be read ahistorically, but this is equally true for the reception of his work. The way Bonhoeffer's legacy was used in different contexts depended on the respective social circumstances, political developments, and ecclesial preconditions.

Our reflection on Bonhoeffer's influence on public ethics begins with the German case. But there is not a single German case; there are at least three. The response to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany took place in three different arenas. That is due to the political history of Germany after the end of the Nazi regime and the liberation of Germany as well as Europe from the terror of violence and war that originated in Germany, followed by the division not only of this country but of Europe. There were quite different conditions and ways in which Bonhoeffer's theology was received and interpreted after 1945 in the two parts of Germany, the (old) Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the (former) German Democratic Republic in the East, the one belonging to the political alliance of western democratic countries under the leadership of the United States of America, the other forming a part of the Warsaw Pact under

the leadership of the Soviet Union. Now for some twenty years, since 1989/90, we have another Germany—a third Germany—after the opening of the wall on November 9, 1989 and the reunification of the country eleven months later.

But even such a distinction between three Germanys includes many problematic simplifications. The predominant challenge for such an approach consists in the fact that the response to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and work took place from the very beginning in an international framework. In the immediate aftermath of his death as a conspirator and martyr his role was interpreted internationally. Those who heard about him in the first years after the end of World War II had to listen to voices like that of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Anglican bishop of Chichester George Bell from Great Britain, or the General Secretary of the emerging World Council of Churches, the Dutch theologian Willem Visser 't Hooft. It was in the first instance his personal life story that made Dietrich Bonhoeffer an international figure. His two visits to Union Theological Seminary, in 1930/31 and 1939, played an outstanding role in the international formation of this theologian. But his time as a vicar in Barcelona, his years as a pastor in London, his visits to Sweden or Switzerland, and his participation in many ecumenical conferences in different countries also contributed their part. His plan to visit Mahatma Gandhi in India shows in a nutshell the global perspective in which he understood what we call today public ethics. After 1945 his work therefore found a worldwide resonance and has always had an international dimension. The present discussion will surely give some evidence for that. I shall restrict myself to just one example in this connection, the fact that the very latest piece of research on Bonhoeffer's peace ethics that has come to my attention was written by a theologian from Rwanda who presented his investigation as a doctoral dissertation at a German university.<sup>1</sup>

My first impulse is to say that public ethics in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's sense has to be put in an international perspective and cannot be limited to a national horizon. Or, to quote Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Bonhoeffer understood *oecumene* "in its original sense as the whole earth populated by human beings," and "as a modern person he could breathe only with difficulty in the provincialism which he found around himself."<sup>2</sup>

However, the following observations concentrate on the impact of Bonhoeffer's theology for public ethics in the three Germanys after 1945. I shall

1. Pascal Bataringaya, "Impulse der Friedensethik Dietrich Bonhoeffers," doctoral dissertation, University of Bochum, 2011.

2. Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker, "Thoughts of a Non-Theologian on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Development," *The Ecumenical Review* 28, no. 2 (April 1976): 156–73.

set aside other vivid debates on his theology, for instance on his Christological concentration, on his ethical concept in general, or on his idea of a nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts—to name only these three. Some of these issues I addressed on other occasions. I choose only three examples for this specific look at Bonhoeffer and public ethics, namely resistance, peace, and the church for others.

### BONHOEFFER'S RECEPTION IN A DIVIDED GERMANY

My retrospective examination of Bonhoeffer's role in public ethics begins with the insight that his influence, from the very beginning, is predominantly not based on his theoretical concepts but on his personal example.<sup>3</sup> His decision to risk his life for a future in peace and justice, and his death as a martyr only a few weeks before the end of Hitler's dictatorship, made him an example of a responsible life in difficult times. His relevance for public ethics relates first of all to his importance as a role model. To trust in God and to act responsibly in the real world are the two basic elements of a way of life that inspired people to follow Bonhoeffer's example under quite different circumstances.

It has to be seen under this perspective that the fragments of *Ethics*, published by Eberhard Bethge already in 1949, and the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published in 1951, found a completely different resonance. It was the German title "Resistance and Submission" (*Widerstand und Ergebung*) that was formative for the picture of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for at least two decades. Key quotations from this book were characteristic for the public posture of persons who tried to transfer Bonhoeffer's example into their private and public life. "By powers of good so wondrously protected, // we wait with confidence, befall what may. // God is with us at night and in the morning // and oh, most certainly on each new day" became characteristic for the dimension of submission to God's will and of trust into his guidance.<sup>4</sup> "Not always doing and daring what's random, but seeking the right thing, // Hover not over the possible, but boldly reach for the real" can be seen as one of the key sentences for the preparedness to address the real challenges of the present time.<sup>5</sup>

However, the term "resistance" created trouble. For a remarkably long time the step from Christian witness to political resistance was seen by people in positions of political responsibility, and even more by church officials, as highly

3. Cf. Christian Gremmels and Hans Pfeifer, eds., *Theologie und Biographie. Zum Beispiel Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1983).

4. *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:550.

5. *Ibid.*, 513.

ambiguous. Although the inner legitimacy of the new democracy on West-German soil depended to a high degree on the courage (and the failure) of the conspirators of July 20, 1944, it took several years until the Federal Republic of Germany officially recognized the conspirators as precursors of this new democracy. And only then could a discussion start on the question whether or not all their convictions really met democratic standards. Disobedience against political authorities, and the decision to break the military oath, were mostly understood as incompatible with the duties of a citizen, and even more with the obligations of a military person. It took therefore a remarkably long time until the judgments against the conspirators were withdrawn or the deserters in World War II were vindicated.

Theology was a little bit quicker than the general public in this regard. As early as 1952 the two Protestant theologians Ernst Wolf and Hans-Joachim Iwand presented a memorandum in the context of the “Remer-trial” on the legitimacy of political resistance, including so-called tyrannicide.<sup>6</sup> These two representatives of Lutheran theology, who were at the same time inspired by the theology of Karl Barth, used the examples of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Norwegian Lutheran Bishop Eivind Berggrav to present the duty of every individual Christian to resist, if necessary even including violent means, in cases of an absolute perversion of the state, or in the case of duties based on justice that follow from obligations toward one’s neighbor. That statement stood clearly in opposition to the official concept of the Protestant churches in remembering the victims of Nazism. The official politics of commemoration separated Christian martyrdom very clearly from political resistance. Martyrs in this sense were only those persons who did not suffer “because they disagreed with the politics of the Third Reich . . . but only and alone because they were convinced that the confession of the church was attacked.”<sup>7</sup> It was therefore unusual and an important breakthrough at the same time, when Wolf and Iwand argued in 1952 for the legitimacy of tyrannicide on theological grounds.

Two years later the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Theodor Heuss, expressed his respect for the German Resistance on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of July 20, 1944.<sup>8</sup> That was a time in which *Letters and Papers from Prison* were not yet published in East Germany. The book appeared there only in 1957, six years after its publication in the West. The hesitation of the censors was due to the prominent place of resistance

6. Hans-Joachim Iwand and Ernst Wolf (1952), “Entwurf eines Gutachtens zur Frage des Widerstandsrechts nach evangelischer Lehre,” in *Junge Kirche* 13 (1952): 192–201 (cf. Hans-Richard Reuter, “Widerstandsrecht. Ethisch,” in RGG4 8:1525–27).

7. Bernhard Heinrich Forck, *Und folget ihrem Glauben nach* (Stuttgart, 1949), 7.

already in the title of the book.<sup>9</sup> The East-German theologian Christoph Haufe functioned as an expert for the censors. He warned that the politics of the church in East Germany could also be treated under the heading of “Resistance and Submission” (*Widerstand und Ergebung*). It was exactly the time in which the state attacked young Christians, put them in prison, and tried to discourage them as much as possible. Christoph Haufe feared that people could regard the situation in which Bonhoeffer had written as parallel to the actual situation in the German Democratic Republic. The censors were not as fearful as this theologian. They thought that readers could distinguish between Nazi Germany and the communist regime of those days. From then onwards it was more or less obligatory in the GDR to call Bonhoeffer’s resistance “antifascist” and to use the phrase “antifascist resistance” as often as possible in order to underline that there was no comparison possible between the first and the second dictatorship on German soil. The hope was that it would become self-evident that there was no reason to draw connections between Bonhoeffer’s attitude toward the Nazi regime and the question of political responsibility in the system of the so-called “really existing socialism” of the GDR.

In West-Germany, Bonhoeffer’s example was from time to time used in the context of civil disobedience as a means of political demonstration on moral grounds. That contributed to a perspective that even gained additional importance in the third, the united Germany. Now Bonhoeffer’s actual contributions to an ethic of responsibility play the central role in the reception of his public ethics. Not an assumed heroism of our actions, but the question of how a future generation can live, that is decisive. This is shown in our days by the contrast between global poverty on the one hand and the irrationalities of global financial markets on the other, or by the great challenges of climate change, demographic development, and new forms of collective and individual violence. It is to the credit of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Lectures on both sides of the Atlantic that they took up many of those new issues and perspectives.

8. Cf. Theodor Heuss, “Dank und Bekenntnis,” in *Bekenntnis und Verpflichtung. Reden zur 10-jährigen Wiederkehr des 20. Juli 1944* (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1955), 9–21. The preface to this volume ends as follows: “Die hier enthaltenen Reden und Aufsätze geben sehr verschiedene Aspekte zum 20. Juli 1944 wieder. Ihre Gemeinsamkeit liegt in einem uneingeschränkten Bekenntnis zur Tat und Haltung des 20. Juli 1944. Auch heute liegt für den Aufbau unseres staatlichen und gesellschaftlichen Lebens in der Stellungnahme zu diesem Ereignis und seiner Gesinnung der Prüfstein der Geister.” The volume includes the text of Eberhard Bethge, “Die deckungslose Tat,” 121–23. Cf. G. R. Ueberschaefer, *Der 20. Juli 1944. Bewertung und Rezeption des deutschen Widerstandes gegen das NS-Regime* (Cologne, 1994).

9. Cf. Wolf Krötke, “Der zensierte Bonhoeffer. Zu einem schwierigen Kapitel der Theologiegeschichte in der DDR,” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 92 (2013): 329–56, esp. 332f.

## PEACE ETHICS

To speak about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's public ethics under the perspective of resistance, as I have been doing, means to look at these ethics from the end, from his involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler's tyranny. An awareness of public ethics came only later in the young Bonhoeffer. Whereas Bonhoeffer's political ethics can be described as a process from pacifism to resistance, the process of reception went the other way around: from resistance to pacifism.

That was due to the fact that the peace problem gained growing awareness in central Europe in the times of Cold War and the arms race between East and West. Here I cannot describe in detail the stages of peace ethics and peace initiatives within the churches in Germany—East and West—after the end of World War II. In Germany the debates on remilitarization in the early fifties and on nuclear armament in the late fifties, then the debate on conscientious objection in the West, and the situation of the so-called “construction troops”<sup>10</sup> in the East, and from the early seventies onwards the hot debate on the deployment of new nuclear missiles—all these were some phases of this debate.

Bonhoeffer's early peace ethics started with his new awareness of the Sermon on the Mount in 1932 and culminated in his contributions to the Fanø Conference in 1934. During the arms race debate of the seventies and eighties they gained growing importance for the Peace Movement in the East as well as in the West of Germany. Again and again the words from Bonhoeffer's address to the Fanø Conference were quoted: “Who will call us to peace so that the world will hear, will have to hear? . . . Only the one great Ecumenical Council of the Holy Church of Christ over all the world can speak out so that the world, though it gnash its teeth, will have to hear, so that the peoples will rejoice because the Church of Christ in the name of Christ has taken the weapons from the hands of their sons, forbidden war, and proclaimed the peace of Christ against the raging world.”<sup>11</sup> In these peace debates Dietrich Bonhoeffer's voice gained growing public importance—and that meant the voice of a theologian whose breakthrough to the biblical word was not related to the highly intellectual text of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, but had its basis in the “unbearable-gracious simplicity of the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>12</sup>

It was in the spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that young people in the GDR started in the early eighties to wear the sign “swords into plowshares” on their jackets, briefcases, or backpacks. The symbol represented the prophetic saying

10. Alleged penal battalions of the “German People's Army” (*Deutsche Volksarmee*) into which those who failed to have their petitions as conscientious objectors were remanded

11. Bonhoeffer, *London 1933–1935* (DBWE 13), 309.

12. Von Weizsäcker, “Thoughts of a Non-Theologian,” 41.

in Isaiah and Micah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”<sup>13</sup> The symbol for the prophetic vision of peace that the young people had on their jackets, briefcases, or backpacks was taken from a sculpture of the Soviet artist Yevgeni Vuchetich that is located in front of the United Nations building in New York. The governing party in the East, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany,<sup>14</sup> charged the bearers of the symbol with an “undifferentiated pacifism.” The intention of this reproach was easy to understand: The military armament of the Warsaw treaty states had to be described as a service of peace, whereas the military armament of Western states had to be seen as a preparation for war; therefore the only acceptable position was to affirm the nuclear armament of the East and to criticize only and alone the parallel efforts of the West. Again the critical point was whether or not it was permitted to apply the impulses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the situation in the GDR itself.

The controversy in the Federal Republic was different as far as freedom of expression was concerned. Big manifestations of the peace movement, partly in combination with large assemblies of the German Protestant Kirchentag, brought the dangers of nuclear armament on both sides to public awareness. The Sermon on the Mount was printed in full length in the pages of a daily newspaper. The controversy referred in this case to the question, whether a pacifist position based on the Sermon on the Mount reflected only an ethic of conviction that did not take into account the real challenges of the time and was not sufficiently aware of the consequences of its proposals, namely a unilateral or a gradual disarmament instead of a “balance of power,” realized in the form of a continuing nuclear arms race. The debate continues today, whether the criticism of the arms race of the seventies and eighties, or whether the decision to counterbalance the military efforts of the other side, contributed more to the end of this kind of military confrontation—an end joyfully reached with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

But one point is not controversial. This whole debate, inspired to a high degree by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, especially by his vision of the “great Ecumenical Council,” led to the conciliar process for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation that dominated the exchange on public ethics ecumenically and internationally from 1983 until 1989/90. The initiative for this process was due to a great extent to the participants from the GDR at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver in 1983. But they also brought

13. Micah 4:3.

14. *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, commonly abbreviated as *SED*.

this initiative back to their own country. There were only few regions on the globe in which this process included as many groups and individuals from the grassroots as in the GDR and—more or less comparably—also in the Federal Republic of Germany. In the GDR this process resulted in the convocations of Magdeburg and Dresden. These assemblies were extremely important precedents for the civil rights groups that had a great impact on the peaceful revolution of 1989. They contributed to an atmosphere in which the Monday prayers in many churches became occasions for free public speech. In different ways the churches created the space for an emerging civil society. Here the democratic transition started around the newly established political parties and round tables. In this way Bonhoeffer's public ethics played a remarkable role in the preparation for the historic change that was witnessed by Europe and the world in 1989 and 1990.

Some optimists thought that the end of the Cold War would also put an end to the big challenges for peace ethics. What an error! Under new circumstances the problem of violence is again on the agenda. Christian peace ethics went through a transformation from an ethics of just war to an ethic of just peace. Bonhoeffer's way from pacifism to resistance included the question for peace ethics after 1990: under which conditions can the use of violence as a last resort be unavoidable to uphold or to restore the rule of law? Whether the "responsibility to protect" can have a place in an ethic of responsibility in Bonhoeffer's sense is one of the great ethical challenges of our times.

### CHURCH FOR OTHERS

There is no Christian public ethic without a reflection on the church as the subject of such public ethics. Here again we can observe an inverted process of reception. The church was a major topic of Bonhoeffer's theology from the very beginning. "Christ existing as church-community" was the sign before the brackets right from the time of his first dissertation, his first lectures at the university, and his first reflections on the center of Christian theology, namely the teaching about Jesus Christ himself. But again a broader reception did not start with these early beginnings but with the end, the diagnosis of a religionless time, the program of nonreligious interpretation of biblical concepts and the proclamation of the church for others: "The church is church only when it is there for others."<sup>15</sup>

Albrecht Schönherr, a student of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Finkenwalde and later my predecessor as Bishop in the Berlin-Brandenburg church, realized

15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, DBWE 8:503.



very soon the importance of these reflections.<sup>16</sup> For him and many others, Bonhoeffer's anticipation of a religionless time functioned as a kind of model for the situation of the church under the anti-Christian regime of the Socialist Unity Party. What Christians in the GDR experienced in their daily life was for them not a deviation or a wrong track in history but an occasion to live a mature Christian life in the midst of the worldliness of the world. The secular character of the new regime was seen as an anticipation of what would become a general feature of the modern world. Therefore "Resistance and Submission" became a general heading for Christian life in the GDR, and the occasion to live under those conditions could even be seen as a part of God's plan.

But there was an evident ambiguity. The legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer encouraged independent criticism as well as it allowed adaptation to given circumstances. State officials could use Dietrich Bonhoeffer symbolically to express their expectation that the church would function as a cultic association that did not interfere with political questions; the so-called CDU theologians<sup>17</sup> could interpret Bonhoeffer in the sense of a two-kingdom doctrine that avoided any practical consequences from the conviction that Christians have to obey God more than human persons.<sup>18</sup> Others—like Heino Falcke—used Bonhoeffer's concept of a "church for others" for the statement that the church stands for an "improvable socialism," because "church for others" means to speak for the silent and the silenced.<sup>19</sup>

This kind of advocacy was not appreciated by the governing party and its officials. Immediately after Heino Falcke presented his deliberations in a famous speech before the General Synod of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR in 1972, the leadership of the church was confronted with the expectation that there would be no public reference to this text in the plenary session of the synod or elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

16. See already in 1955 Albrecht Schönherr, "Bonhoeffer's Gedanken über die Kirche und ihre Predigt in der 'mündig' gewordenen Welt," in *Die Mündige Welt I* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1955), 76–89.

17. Christian Democratic Union. Such "CDU theologians" might be said to include Gerhard Ebeling, Ulrich Duchrow, and Heinrich Bornkamm, among other Protestant and perhaps most Catholic theologians in Germany today. See Hans-Joachim Gänsler, *Evangelium und weltliches Schwert. Hintergrund, Entstehungsgeschichte und Anlass von Luthers Scheidung zweier Reiche oder Regimente*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung für abendländische Religionsgeschichte (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1983), 155ff.

18. Acts 5:29.

19. Heino Falcke, "Christus befreit—darum Kirche für andere." Referat auf der vierten Tagung der Synode des Bundes der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR vom 30.6. bis 4.7. 1972 in Dresden, in Peter Fischer, *Kirche und Christen in der DDR* (Berlin: Holzapfel, 1978), 242–55. It was forbidden to publish Falcke's paper in the GDR.

For the use of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the public role of the church, these years brought a certain kind of culmination. It was Albrecht Schönherr, who in 1971 interpreted the public role of the church in the GDR with the sentence, that it is "church in the socialist society, not against it, not apart from it." Very quickly this well-balanced formula was simplified into the slogan of a "church in socialism." In consequence, Bonhoeffer's formula of the "church for others" became functional for a submission of the church under the communist regime.

Looking back on the relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for Christian existence in the GDR, Albrecht Schönherr with good reason could summarize: "It is not an expression of arrogance but it belongs to the specific situation of the church in the GDR, when we notice as a fact, that in this church Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from the beginning and continuously until the end, was more heard and taken seriously than in the Federal Republic."<sup>21</sup> His statement is echoed by Klaus Gysi, Secretary of State for ecclesial affairs in the GDR from 1979 until 1988, who said in a retrospective on the course of the GDR and its end: "Without the idea of Bonhoeffer, that the church is present for all . . . it would be impossible to understand what happened after 1979. And most of all the role of the protestant churches in the GDR . . . from 1985 to 1990 cannot be grasped without this idea." The consequence drawn by Gysi as a former public servant of the GDR is even more remarkable. He said in 1993: "The capacity to accompany critically the use of power is the most important learning-experience of the churches in the GDR and therefore the most important duty for the public activity of the churches in Germany."<sup>22</sup>

Such a learning process happened also in the West-German churches, but it did so under much easier conditions. But also those churches went through the ambiguities just explained regarding the example of the churches in the GDR. Also Christians and churches in the West were encouraged by the example of Bonhoeffer to evaluate the use of power critically and to take sides for peace and justice, for reconciliation and solidarity. But to be in the world meant for them often enough practically to be apart from the world.

20. Cf. the reports of Albrecht Schönherr and Heino Falcke on these events in Ernst Feil, ed., *Glauben lernen in einer Kirche für andere. Der Beitrag Dietrich Bonhoeffers zum Christsein in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher, 1993), 115f.

21. Albrecht Schönherr, "Die Bedeutung Dietrich Bonhoeffers für das Christsein in der DDR," in Ernst Feil, *ibid.*, 40–55.

22. Klaus Gysi, "Meine Begegnung mit einem Schüler Dietrich Bonhoeffers, Albrecht Schönherr," *ibid.*, 76–85.

To look forward to future consequences that have to be drawn from Bonhoeffer's legacy for public ethics means therefore again and again, to read the signs of the times in a way in which the submission to God's will is not mixed up with the simple adaptation to given power structures or the existing misuse of power. The arrogance of power executed by today's financial markets, the blindness of political powers with regard to their responsibility for future generations, the transition to global justice and empowerment of the poor or a sustainable way of production and use of energy are some of the fields, for which we not only have to understand Bonhoeffer's image of a "church for others" in the broader sense of a "church with others," but even more to transform it into the vision of an ecumenical "church for the world."