

# Interpreting Bonhoeffer

*Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues*

Clifford J. Green, Guy C. Carter

## EDITOR'S FORWORD

The time is ripe for a synoptic assessment of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As we near the seventieth anniversary of his death in 1945, his popularity has never been greater. Yet one could argue that he is simultaneously the most quoted and the most misinterpreted Christian theologian of the twentieth century. This volume, under the broad rubric *Interpreting Bonhoeffer*, presents leading Bonhoeffer scholars addressing the multifaceted challenge of understanding and conveying to later generations a sophisticated Christian thinker and courageous historical actor from the traumatic mid-twentieth century.

The publication of this volume closely corresponds to the publication of the final volume of the sixteen-volume complete works, the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition. That everything is now in English makes it not only possible, but also necessary, that we read Bonhoeffer the man and Bonhoeffer the theologian *whole*. The time is past when one could credibly extrapolate a theology from a few phrases plucked from his provocative *Letters and Papers from Prison*. No longer can one tear a few sentences from their historical and intellectual context to deploy in an argument about a contemporary war or some other contested ethical or political issue. Nor is it legitimate to project the preferences and prejudices of competing religious parties onto Bonhoeffer by interpreting all of his theology through one of his influential books, *Discipleship*, for example, or his prison letters and *Ethics*. Respect for the man, respect for truth, and responsibility to future generations require more patience, more honesty, and more effort to truly understand the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

These sentiments informed the conference “Bonhoeffer for the Coming Generations” that was held at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, in November 2011. The international participants were invited to commemorate the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition (DBWE) and also the Bonhoeffer Lectures in Public Ethics. Both undertakings date their beginnings

to the mid-eighties. The year 1986 saw the publication of the first volume of the German Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke (DBW), the critical edition on which the English scholarly edition rests. About the same time, thanks to the initiatives of Helmut Reihlen, Berlin, and Donald Shriver, then President of Union Theological Seminary, the Bonhoeffer Chair in Theology and Ethics was planned and later inaugurated at Union, together with a Scholar Exchange program between Germany and North America, and the annual Bonhoeffer Lectures in Public Ethics. These lectures are held in alternating years in Germany and North America, and are devoted to major public issues addressed in light of Bonhoeffer's legacy. Initially the American Bonhoeffer lectures were held at Union; in the past decade they have also been held in other cities such as Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis. Typical subjects have been: universal human rights; guilt and reconciliation in politics; economic justice; solidarity and women's wisdom; race and reparations; medical ethics and the value of human life; world poverty and moral responsibility; peace; genocide; and state and church.

This rich tradition of over two decades of scholarly work on the Bonhoeffer Works editions, and of engagement with critical issues of ethics and public life, was expressed in the conference "Bonhoeffer for the Coming Generations." Invited speakers represented Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as Europe and North America. Papers were presented by younger scholars as well as seasoned veterans. Because of the very intentional focus of the conference planning, an unusual coherence around aspects of interpretation was the outcome, and is evident in the chapters that follow.

Part 1 of the volume is primarily historical in orientation, but at the same time is strongly concerned with ethical and theological issues; the emphasis of Part 2 is primarily theological and ethical, but it also has a strong historical dimension.

The first day of the conference, and the first part of this book, was inspired by the Bonhoeffer Lectures in Public Ethics. While these lectures have been held to date in Germany and the United States, the influence of Bonhoeffer's legacy of ethical thinking and personal acting can be found in Christian communities worldwide. So, the first chapters begin with examples of how the Bonhoeffer legacy has engaged issues of public life in Germany, Britain, and the United States, and then move to the distinctive challenges faced during the last half-century in the widely different cultural, religious, and political situations of South Africa, Brazil, and Japan.

The second day of the conference commemorated the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition, proleptically celebrating its completion in 2013, when

the last of the sixteen volumes, *Theological Education at Finkenwalde* (volume 14), will be published. The present book therefore moves the theme of interpretation to focus on the art of translation, with chapters from two of the project's translators. They are introduced, as it were, by a chapter from the person who straddled both languages as the liaison between the German and English editorial boards, Hans Pfeifer.

The language expertise of translators inevitably requires historical sophistication. Historians have naturally been deeply involved in Bonhoeffer scholarship, given the momentous times of his life and the complexity of some of the issues it involved, for example, the conspiracy against Hitler, and the contradictory ways that different parts of the German church responded to the National Socialist regime. One prominent interest of historians has been Bonhoeffer's contested relationship to the Jews, and the pertinence of his theology to Christian-Jewish relations after the Holocaust. All these matters of interpretation appear in the chapters by historians. And readers will find the historians regularly puncturing common tendencies to oversimplify, to mythologize, and to heroize Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in popular biographies—even worse, attempts to paint him as the patron saint of their ideological causes.

In Part 2, the latter part of the book, the interpretive work of theologians comes to the fore. It is probably possible to understand, appreciate, and interpret the systems of some theologians relatively independently of their historical circumstances; one thinks of Paul Tillich, for example. Not so with Bonhoeffer, for much of his theology and ethics was forged in engagement with theological antagonists in the church as well as with the doctrines and policies of Nazi politics. Yet Bonhoeffer's theology is not an epiphenomenon of the church struggle and resistance to Nazism. A thinker of the first order, whose often subtle intellectual decisions and distinctions are overlooked by fascination with the drama of his life, his theological and ethical thinking must be examined in its own integrity. Thus the chapters in Part 2 are devoted to close readings of two of his most influential texts, *Discipleship* and *Ethics*; to a detailed reflection on the influence on him of the Harlem Renaissance; and to a comparison of his understanding of the "church for others" with Paul's critique of empire. Each of these brings forth new research, particularly from younger scholars.

The final section of the book addresses three intra-theological topics. Chapter 18 analyzes how Bonhoeffer's Christology is to be interpreted in societies characterized by religious pluralism. Chapter 19 introduces a key aspect of Bonhoeffer's methodology to show how his theological concept of "person" clarifies his agreement and disagreement with Karl Barth. And Chapter

20 proposes that Bonhoeffer's understanding of worldly Christianity, from his dissertation to his prison letters, is a quest for a new Christian paradigm.

The Epilogue actually began the conference as a keynote address. It is chiefly a meditation on the theme of "being with," first articulated by Bonhoeffer as a mark of the church in *Sanctorum Communio*, and here presented as a corrective, perhaps, to the overuse of his theme—also found in the same place—of "being for," as in Jesus "the man for others" and the life of the church as "being for others."

The conference, and its commemoration of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition and the Bonhoeffer Lectures in Public Ethics, was honored by the presence of the German Consul General in New York, Busso von Alvensleben. His speech at the closing banquet is presented as the Afterword.

The Editors wish to express special thanks to Professor Christiane Tietz, President of the International Bonhoeffer Society in the Federal Republic of Germany and Professor of Protestant Systematic Theology of the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, for her initial encouragement to undertake this book project immediately following the November 2011 Conference "Bonhoeffer for the Coming Generations," as well as for her help in exploring ways and means to realize this project. Sincere thanks go as well to Fortress Press, which continues to be not only a publisher but a friend of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition and of so very many works by and about Dietrich Bonhoeffer in English translation. To the learned contributors in whom the international impact of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and thought is mirrored, we extend our greetings of thanks and congratulations for their part in this effort.