

Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic, Conditional Pacifism, and Resistance

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Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was first and foremost a Christian theologian whose peace ethic grew out of his theology, as did his role in the coup d'état conspiracy to overthrow Hitler and National Socialism. Bonhoeffer's was not an ethic of principles, neither did he abandon his Christian peace ethic to support the conspiracy. This chapter traces the development of his peace ethic to a form of conditional pacifism whose main components were Christological, ecclesial, scriptural, and doctrinal. Likewise it argues that his ethic of free responsibility exercised in the conspiracy must be understood from key theological passages and ethical themes in his book *Ethics*.

Keywords: Christology, ecclesiology, pacifism, peace ethic, Sermon on the Mount, tyrannicide

In a revealing autobiographical letter sent from his Finkenwalde seminary in 1936, Bonhoeffer wrote that he had recently experienced 'a great liberation', caused by 'the Bible, especially the Sermon on the Mount'. As a result, he was devoted to renewal of the church and the pastorate, and 'Christian pacifism' was now 'something utterly self-evident' (DBWE 14: 134). Statements like this, and his book *Discipleship*, have led some to argue that Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who was committed to a consistent nonviolence, one who did not participate in, nor approve of, any plot to kill Hitler and overthrow his regime. Others have reasoned that,

since Bonhoeffer was involved in the conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi regime, and did indeed approve the effort to kill Hitler, he must have abandoned his pacifism for just war thinking or something like Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism. Neither approach interprets Bonhoeffer on his own terms or identifies the distinctive components of his peace ethic. Instead I propose that Bonhoeffer's peace ethic is based on its theological components, not on a commitment to nonviolence, and that he does not abandon these fundamental convictions to help the conspiracy which was planning the coup d'état.

Beginning with Bonhoeffer's initial pro-war writings and ending with his participation in the anti-Hitler conspiracy in the last years of his life, this chapter will present the emergence of Bonhoeffer's 'pacifism' and the development of his Christian peace ethic. He does not present his peace ethic as a systematic treatise. Rather, its components are articulated in specific contexts such as lectures, addresses at ecumenical conferences, his book *Discipleship*, letters, and personal conversations. The main components are Christological, ecclesial, scriptural, and doctrinal. These components began to appear several years before Hitler's seizure of power, and from 1930 to 1937 they are consolidated in a process of *Christological concentration*. Basic to the exposition is Bonhoeffer's conviction that a Christian ethic is not an ethic of principles, neither should the commandments of Jesus be treated as principles. Writings in which Bonhoeffer supports the use of force and violence and, in some cases, leaves the door open for military action, are examined. The final part of the chapter then turns to passages in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* where he gives a theological and ethical interpretation of tyrannicide and of his own participation in the political conspiracy to overthrow the National Socialist regime.

First, a clarification of two terms. Because Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist in the usual sense of the word, I speak of his Christian ‘peace ethic’, somewhat like Heinz Eduard Tödt’s ‘ecumenical ethics of peace’ (Tödt, 2007:112). For most people pacifism means opposition to war and violence in principle, and a commitment to non-violence as a general principle. Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist in principle, though he was certainly opposed to Hitler’s war, and believed that modern warfare was intrinsically destructive to both warring sides. Rather, his Christian peace ethic—note the adjective—was explicitly theological, clearly distinguished from humanitarian peace advocacy which he called ‘secular pacifism’ (DBWE 13: 305). And, given his Lutheran heritage, his ‘peace ethic’ was equally distinct from the pacifism of the traditional peace churches, who rejected Luther’s teaching in this respect.

In describing the conspiracy’s attempts to kill Hitler, I use the term ‘tyrannicide’, not ‘assassination’. The killings of Abraham Lincoln, John. F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were assassinations, political murders. Tyrannicide is an ethical and legal term referring to the legitimate killing of a tyrant. It has a long history in moral philosophy, and is usually presented by reasoning similar to just war doctrine. Bonhoeffer was familiar with tyrannicide theory, as we will see, and he alluded to Hitler as a tyrant. However, he did not base his participation in the resistance conspiracy on this theory, but grounded it in his own theological ethics, just as he did his peace ethic.

The emergence of Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic

Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic began to take shape about 1929-1930. But this was not where he began. In October, 1914, three months after World War I broke out, ninety-three German intellectuals published a manifesto supporting German war policy. Among them were men who

would become Bonhoeffer's university teachers, Adolf von Harnack, Reinhold Seeberg, and several other prominent theologians. Bonhoeffer's older brothers served in the war; indeed, his brother Walter died of war wounds. Bonhoeffer himself justified war in his 1927 doctoral dissertation; he expanded the argument in a 1929 lecture on Christian ethics to the congregation in Barcelona where he served as vicar. That lecture even justified war of aggression as part of the God-given, created historical order (DBWE 10: 359-78). His argument used traditional Lutheran 'orders-of-creation' thinking, according to which certain existing social forms such as families, nations, and races are natural, God-given realities with rights, historical purposes, and obligations. Therefore a people (*Volk*) goes to war following God's will and call to fulfill its historical mission. 'Here war is no longer murder', Bonhoeffer wrote (DBWE 1: 119). The Barcelona lecture amplifies these views, articulating a philosophy of war later championed by the Nazis to legitimate expansionism (*Lebensraum*); this view is paralleled by a winner-versus-loser model of economic expansion, and invokes an idea of God who is 'eternally young and strong and victorious' (DBWE 10: 373).

But, in these same writings, Bonhoeffer also reveals his theological qualms about these views. God's call to make history involves 'entering fully into the ambiguity of human sinful action' (DBWE 1: 119), for which both nation and church must repent. He refers to the Decalogue commandment against murder and the Sermon on the Mount's commandment, 'Love your enemies'. But then he piously observes that Christian soldiers should pray for their enemies, even while killing them in battle. And as for the Sermon on the Mount, love of family and nation (*Volk*) trump love of enemies.

During the next two or three years Bonhoeffer abandoned this order-of-creation type of war justification. Yet several aspects of his thinking in this early lecture remain permanently in his ethics. First, Christian ethics is not an ethic of principles. Consequently, the commandments of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount should not be interpreted as laws and principles. Along with his rejection of abstract ethical principles in Christian ethics is a permanent assertion of contextual freedom in a Christologically interpreted view of worldly reality.

It is common to regard Bonhoeffer's 1930-31 discussions in America of the Sermon on the Mount, especially those with the French Reformed pastor Jean Lasserre, as the beginning of his concern with peace and pacifism. But there are hints of an earlier beginning. For example, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's closest friend, biographer and editor, wrote that the years 1929-1930 were 'marked by the development of his conditional pacifism (*bedingter Pazifismus*)', a phrase that should be noted (Bethge 2000: 127). In these years Bonhoeffer established the first close friendship of his life; the friend was Franz Hildebrandt, a lifelong pacifist. Also during this time, Bonhoeffer attended the Moabit church in Berlin, where Günther Dehn, a pacifist and socialist, was one of the few theologians whose sermons he could bear to hear. He also came to Dehn's defense, with the help of Karl Barth, by initiating an open letter supporting Dehn when he was attacked by right-wing students at Halle University (DBWE 11: 482; cf. Bethge, 2000: 128, 235f.). The question of pacifism appears to have been on his mind before he went to America.

Bonhoeffer's preparation in 1930 for talks he anticipated giving in New York seems to support this. In his notebook he wrote out in English an address "War" (DBWE 10: 411-18). He

describes the suffering and death of war, and the severe postwar deprivations, he admits German faults, and considers the war as God's judgment on a fallen world. Then he mentions the German peace movement led by the working class and youth, and advances a theological argument: there is a great unity of Christianity, transcending all national desires, one Christian people throughout the world; all are brothers, children of one Father, imbued by the spirit of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Never again must Christian people fight against other Christians. How can those who hate their fellow Christians expect grace from God? While Bonhoeffer's love of homeland, and his criticism of the Versailles Treaty, are still obvious in this address, his emphasis is now on peace. Significantly, this theologically implies both a doctrine of the church and a doctrine of God: the universal church and the love of God for all humanity. The universal love of God for all humanity calls for a universal church, one transcending all national, ethnic, and racial divisions. Here, before his discussions with Jean Lasserre in New York about the Sermon on the Mount, the *ecclesial component* of his theological peace ethic is already prominent.

Toward Christocentric concentration and concrete discipleship

The years 1930-1932 were formative for Bonhoeffer, both theologically and personally. Thirteen years later, in his prison letters, he recalled his 1930-31 post-doctoral year at Union Theological Seminary, especially his intense discussions with Jean Lasserre about what it means to have faith (DBWE 8: 485-86). Central to these discussions was the Sermon on the Mount. As noted above, a letter in 1936 described this as a time of 'a great liberation' inspired by 'the

Bible and especially the Sermon on the Mount', and states that 'Christian pacifism . . . suddenly came into focus as something utterly self-evident' (DBWE 14: 134).

These theological reflections were accompanied by the existential experience of worship at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.¹ There Adam Clayton Powell Sr. was preaching 'that enemy-love, non-retaliation, and forgiveness were the very heart of the gospel; . . . to follow Jesus, Powell urged, one had to take up the costly, fellow-suffering discipleship of the Sermon on the Mount'. Like Bonhoeffer, who was reading reports on Gandhi in Harry Ward's course and making practical plans to visit him in India (Green, 2008: 53-54), 'Powell lionized Gandhian nonviolent resistance to oppression'. And Powell, like Bonhoeffer, held the Spirituals in high regard, taking his Abyssinian singers to anti-war rallies where they would sing, 'I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside. . . . I ain't gonna study war no more' (Dorrien, 2015: 437-42). Discussions with Lasserre and Powell's preaching reinforced each other.

Both Lasserre and Bethge believe that Bonhoeffer's 'pacifism' had its roots in these Union-Abyssinian experiences of 1931. Bonhoeffer himself would later call this liberation a 'turning from phraseology to the real' (DBWE 8: 358). Stated theologically, it is a turning to a Christocentric concentration and concrete discipleship. For Bonhoeffer, the Sermon on the

¹ Franklin Fisher, Bonhoeffer's black friend at Union Seminary, introduced him to Abyssinian where for six months he taught in the Sunday School, led a Bible study in a women's group, and visited with these parishioners in their homes (DBWE 10: 29).

Mount unites the commanding Jesus and his call to obedience. Christology and ethics are inseparable – they are welded together in the word ‘discipleship’.

Bonhoeffer’s theological peace ethic develops in several stages. Already the Christological center has been identified with reference to the prominence of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount – it is, of course, also a major *biblical component*. So is the long, new opening paragraph, which Bonhoeffer added to the 1930 ‘War’ address that he had prepared in Berlin, converting it into a sermon for Armistice Day that he preached in a New York church, again writing out the whole piece in his notebook (DBWE 10: 580-84).²

The new paragraph opening the sermon shows Bonhoeffer thinking theologically about peace on the basis of Scripture, quoting many New Testament texts.³ With these texts he invokes several aspects of his peace ethic: the doctrine of God; the unity of Christians in Christ, not divided by religion, class, or gender; the unity of all people in sin and before grace; and the suffering love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. The worldwide Christian community of mutual prayer and love, infused by the love of God, resists hate and enmity. By this point in his

² Commemorating the signing of the armistice that ended World War I, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, Armistice Day in the United States was incorporated into Veterans Day in 1954.

³ 1 John 4:16 is the lead text for the sermon: ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him’. Other texts quoted or alluded to are Galatians 3:28, Romans 3:23-25, and Ephesians 4:4-6.

developing peace ethic, aggressive war, as justified by order-of-creation thinking, has disappeared completely.

It is highly likely that the biblically-rich opening paragraph added to create the Armistice Day sermon was inspired by Bonhoeffer and Lasserre watching the film of Erich Maria Remarque, 'All Quiet on the Western Front', in autumn, 1930. Lasserre later recalled that the film had 'just appeared' and that this 'one event . . . left a deep mark on my life all that winter'.⁴ The film was made from a German perspective, and the American audience reacted with strong anti-French feeling; this pained Lasserre and embarrassed Bonhoeffer. But since Bonhoeffer responded very sensitively to his friend, they were not trapped in the nationalistic hostility of the cinema but united in Christian kinship in the body of Christ. 'I think our pacifist convictions were deeply implanted for both of us that day', Lasserre wrote. 'Faith had clearly and decidedly more weight and authority than patriotism' (DBWE 10: 26-28, fn.126 and 130, translation altered). Bethge recounts that Lasserre confronted Bonhoeffer 'with an acceptance of Jesus' peace commandment that he had never encountered before,' which led to 'a new understanding of the Sermon on the Mount' that transformed Bonhoeffer's 'academic knowledge of Lutheran ethics . . . into a committed identification with Christ's teachings of

⁴ Lasserre's memoir of Bonhoeffer (originally published in *La Vie Chretienne*, October/November 1981) was translated by Allen Hackett, who knew Lasserre and Bonhoeffer at Union Seminary; the translation was published in the *Newsletter* of the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, No. 31, March 1986, page 3. The film was released on August 24, 1930, and won the Academy Award for Best Picture on November 5.

peace'. According to Bethge, the 'biblical-ecumenical belief in the one body of Christ' was the 'foundation' of Bonhoeffer's peace ethic, a structure on which he continued to build (Bethge, 2000: 153-54). But Christology is also central to this foundation, given not only the prominence of the Sermon on the Mount for Bonhoeffer, but also his theology of the church as 'Christ existing as church-community'.

The next step in Bonhoeffer's developing peace ethic occurs in the summer of 1931 after his return to Berlin. With his friend Franz Hildebrandt, Bonhoeffer wrote a catechism (DBWE 11: 258-67). Regarding the destruction of life in war, it states: 'The church knows nothing of the sanctity of war . . . [which] is fought with dehumanized means. The church that prays the Lord's Prayer calls to God only for peace' (DBWE 11: 262). The catechism, significantly, is theological, alluding to the doctrine of creation: 'all races of humanity of the earth come from one blood (Acts 17:26)'. This is another example of a *doctrinal component* of Bonhoeffer's peace ethic: he totally excludes orders-of-creation thinking. Further, in the Catechism the authors write: 'The church knows today more than ever how little it obeys the Sermon on the Mount. Yet the greater the discord in the world becomes, the more Christ wants to have proclaimed the peace of God that reigns in his kingdom' (DBWE 11: 265, 269).

By now it is quite clear that the Sermon on the Mount has become central in Bonhoeffer's peace ethic, and this will be reinforced in what follows. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how he interprets the Sermon, particularly his distinction between *law* and God's *commandment*. In his important 1932 lecture, 'On the Theological Foundation of the World Alliance', Bonhoeffer wrote:

Even the Sermon on the Mount may not become a literal law for us. In its commandments it is the illustration of that which God's commandment can be, but not exactly what it is today especially for us. No one can hear this except we ourselves, and God himself must say it to us. The commandment is not there once and for all; rather it must always be given anew' (DBWE 11: 362).

According to Bonhoeffer, if the words of Christ which have the status of 'law' in the Sermon are to become a contemporary commandment of God 'now and here', they must be mediated by Christ and made concrete through Christ's presence in the church (cf. DBWE 11: 335, 341, 487-88; and DeJonge, 2017: 170-72).

Bonhoeffer illustrates this thinking as follows. If the commandment to 'love thy neighbor' is on its own terms utterly general, it needs to be made concrete 'if I am to hear what it means for me here and today' (DBWE 11: 360). And this is even more the case for the command of Jesus, 'Love your enemies' (Matt. 5:44). Arguing that the church can only give specific commandments to the world—such as 'fight this war, or, do not fight this war' (DBWE 11: 360)—Bonhoeffer supplies his own concrete contextualization. Modern war, he insists, 'means the certain self-destruction of both warring sides' and therefore 'today it is utterly impossible to characterize it [war] as an order of preservation towards revelation, simply because it is absolutely destructive'. Therefore, he concludes, 'today's war, the next war, must be *condemned* by the church' (DBWE 11: 366-67).

This July World Alliance lecture was followed by another ecumenical address in August in Gland, Switzerland. Once again, Bonhoeffer paints a picture of '*millions of starving people [and] humiliated and degraded nations* [in] a world bristling with weapons as never before, a

world that is feverishly mobilizing for war' (DBWE 11: 378-79). In this world, the ecumenical church knows the commandment to peace, and its message of the 'cross of Christ calls forth wrath and judgment upon the world and proclaims peace. . . . [T]here should be no war. . . . In this world, there is peace only in the struggle for truth and justice' (DBWE 11: 378-81).

'Christ and Peace' and Fanø

The ecumenical peace lectures of 1932 culminate in a pivotal December lecture, 'Christ and Peace'. This is a milestone; its importance cannot be overstated. Culminating the theological development that flowered in New York, its importance is twofold: first, the lecture displays the new Christological center of Bonhoeffer's peace ethic, highlighting the teaching of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount; second, it presents essential ideas of his 1937 book *Discipleship*. It is no accident that, in this lecture, discipleship to Christ and the peace ethic appear together like twins. And this reminds us that Bonhoeffer's peace ethic is not grounded on a principle of nonviolence: it is a theological peace ethic centered on the person of Christ and grounded in core components of Bonhoeffer's theology.

The lecture's *Discipleship* themes are obvious, especially the signature phrase 'cheap grace' (DBWE 12: 260), defined as grace without obedience. Christ is the 'one *authority*', and discipleship to Christ is based on 'single-minded *faith*,' which is authentic only in discipleship (DBWE 12: 259, translation altered).

If the 'Christ' of this lecture's title is presented in terms of the Christology of *Discipleship*, its 'Peace' focuses on the Sermon on the Mount, which is also central to the book. 'To the single-minded reader of the Sermon on the Mount, what it says is unmistakable' (DBWE

12: 259, translation altered). Following Bonhoeffer, the Beatitudes call us to become disciples of Jesus. ‘The commandment “You shall not kill”, the word [of Jesus] that says, “Love your enemies”, is given to us simply to be obeyed. For Christians, any military service, except in the ambulance corps, and any preparation for war, is forbidden’ (DBWE 12: 260).

The texts on war and peace cited thus far have themes that are variously Christological, ecclesial, scriptural, and doctrinal. These themes are now united and bound together by the Christocentric concreteness of this lecture, as they are in the book *Discipleship*:

1. *Jesus Christ* is the one *authority* who has spoken definitively on the question of peace (DBWE 12: 259).
2. What the Sermon on the Mount says to the single-minded reader is unmistakable.
3. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God (which is not to be negated by citing Romans 13.1) that is not a program of political peace but a call to discipleship, which witnesses for peace.
4. In proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Christ was not promising peace to a godless and sinful world which will always have war. He was calling us to love God in single-minded discipleship, and to become witnesses for peace.
5. Faith, severed from obedience (*Gehorsam*) misunderstands law and gospel as if the gospel is a “message of forgiveness of sin that does not address the citizen or indeed deal with any aspect of the earthly life of human beings’ (DBWE 12:260). Without obedience one only asks for cheap grace.

It is highly significant that in the lecture ‘Christ and Peace’ the conception of the *Discipleship* book occurs in a marriage with the developing peace ethic. The themes of personal

faith and allegiance to Jesus and his commandments become concrete in the issue of peace.

Faith and obedience are wedded in an indissoluble union—united but not confused, distinct but not divided.

After 'Christ and Peace', the next prominent expression of the peace ethic occurred during Bonhoeffer's London pastorate of two German churches. In August 1934 he gave an address in Fanø, Denmark, at the ecumenical conference of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches—after his death it was to become his most famous public peace address. Bonhoeffer called upon the ecumenical church to proclaim to the nations God's commandment: God has said 'that there shall be peace among men—that we shall obey Him without further question' (DBWE 13: 308). He presented this as a concrete commandment quite specific to his own time. The year 1934 is in the period after World War I when the machine gun had revolutionized modern warfare, mowing down platoons of infantry like a harvester mowing a field of wheat. It is also the time when World War II began to loom on the horizon—indeed, it was even the time of beginnings for the ultimate weapon that would incinerate Hiroshima only four months after Bonhoeffer's death. For Bonhoeffer, God's commandment was not a law on a stone tablet nor a sentence in a holy book. It was a concrete commandment for 'now and here', as he typically puts it, a divine command for the era of modern warfare.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of God's commandment here resembles Karl Barth's understanding of revelation. For Barth, revelation is an *event*. It is not a deposit, a sacred text, a dogma, nor any sort of entity that can be grasped by controlling human hands, but an encounter, a confrontation, an engagement that happens 'from time to time'. Just as Barth

regarded the Barmen Declaration of May, 1934, as an actual event of revelation, so Bonhoeffer argued that the ecumenical church represented in Fanø was called to proclaim an actual commandment for the now and here: *no more war!*

Discipleship

Previewed by 'Christ and Peace' in 1932, proclaimed in public at Fanø in 1934 with nothing less than a commandment of God against war, Bonhoeffer's peace ethic culminates in the publication of *Discipleship* in 1937. The reader has already been prepared for a strong pacifist stance by earlier statements like this: 'The commandment "You shall not kill" and the word that says "Love your enemies" is given to us simply to be obeyed' (DBWE 12: 260).

In *Discipleship*, after treating the call to discipleship, and single-minded obedience as the mark of the disciple, Bonhoeffer comes to the Sermon on the Mount. This, he said in 1936, made Christian pacifism as he understood it self-evident. Interpreting Matthew 5:38-48, Bonhoeffer elaborates on the words of Jesus. Not resisting the evildoer means patiently bearing the blow, letting evil run its course, 'the voluntary renunciation of counter-violence' (DBWE 4: 132-33). Bonhoeffer then treats verse 44 as the high point of the Sermon on the Mount, for the word 'love' summarizes it all. Jesus commands his disciples to love their enemies. The life to which Jesus calls the disciples is truly extraordinary. 'It is the way of self-denial, perfect love, perfect purity, perfect truthfulness, perfect nonviolence' (DBWE 4: 144).

Peace ethic, force, violence, and war

But even in *Discipleship* there are apparently paradoxical passages that are often overlooked or ignored. Statements of Jesus, e.g., 'Do not resist an evildoer' (Matt. 5:39), must

neither be understood as ‘pure enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*]’ nor as providing ‘a general ethical program’. We should not,

interpret the statement that evil will only be conquered by good [Romans 12:21] as general secular wisdom for the world and life. That really would be an irresponsible imagining of laws which the world would never obey. Nonresistance [*Wehrlosigkeit*] as a principle for worldly life is godless destruction of the order of the world which God graciously preserves’ (DBWE 4: 136, translated altered).

In Bonhoeffer’s reading, this particular statement applies only to Jesus himself, who overcame evil by submitting to it on the cross and then being resurrected as conqueror and victor. The command applies only to those who, in the cross of Jesus, find faith in the victory over evil.

To understand this seemingly inconsistent position, we must confront recurrent statements by Bonhoeffer that contradict a straightforward pacifist understanding and appear to permit the use of force and violence, and perhaps even war in certain circumstances. They certainly prevent a straightforward, literal understanding of the Sixth Commandment and verses in the Sermon on the Mount such as ‘Do not resist an evildoer’ (DBWE 4: 131f.). It is notable that some of these strong statements occur in Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde lectures, contemporaneous with ongoing work on *Discipleship*.

In his 1937 preparatory remarks about Memorial Day, Bonhoeffer states: ‘war is a sin against God’s gospel of peace’ and must be repented of because churches have blessed World War I and Christians fought against Christians. War is a sign of God’s judgment; the cross nevertheless proclaims the infinite love of God, God’s compassion and forgiveness (DBWE 14: 763). In his lecture about the ‘War Sermon’, Bonhoeffer judges that in World War I sermons in

both Germany and England were equally bad. The church, he argued, does not pray for its own nation's cause, it only prays for peace for soldiers on *both* sides (DBWE 14: 766). War intrinsically justifies sin because it contradicts God's commandment. But a final answer to 'whether a Christian should or should not participate [in war] must be rejected. Both answers are possible. One person shows solidarity and goes along'. The other says the government is demanding sin and refuses. Bonhoeffer summarizes, 'On the one hand, we are threatened by militarism. And on the other, by doctrinaire pacifism' (DBWE 14: 766). Such a strong denunciation of much Christian pacifism, here treated as a doctrinaire rejection of all war, means that Bonhoeffer's own peace ethic must be significantly different. Could he even sanction military action in certain circumstances?

Also contemporaneous with *Discipleship* are the following reflections about the Sixth Commandment from the Finkenwalde catechism plan:

How are Christians to act in war? There is *no* revealed commandment of God here. The church can never give its blessing to war and weapons. The Christian can never participate in unjust wars. If the Christian takes up arms, he must daily ask God for forgiveness for this sin and pray for peace (DBWE 14: 791).

While imposing church constraints on war, this appears to allow a Christian to serve in a just war, even though it is sinful, and it clearly states that there is no revealed commandment from God about war in general. But could there be participation in a particular war, such as a humanitarian intervention by a United Nations force? For Bonhoeffer, there is by no means an obvious answer to that question.

Bonhoeffer has a similar attitude when facing conscription himself. In 1939 he wrote to Bishop Bell for personal advice. On Christian grounds, he says, it is ‘conscientiously impossible to join in a war under the present circumstances’, i.e., Hitler’s war. He repeats the same qualification—‘under the present conditions’—but then continues: ‘I have not yet made up my mind what I would do under different circumstances’ (DBWE 15: 156-57). It is hypothetically possible, then, to imagine Bonhoeffer serving in a war.

But the issue is not just Hitler’s war. He also envisages other circumstances where force, perhaps even war, would prove necessary. Writing for his resistance friends and colleagues at Christmas of 1942, he suggests that ‘*stupidity*’ (*Dummheit*) is impervious to both facts and reason, and so is actually more dangerous than evil: ‘Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than evil. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. ... Against stupidity we are defenseless’ (DBWE 8: 43). Here Bonhoeffer sounds like a classical Lutheran who, in the Finkenwalde catechism instruction, had referred to the office of the sword and Romans 13:3-4 (DBWE 14: 790-91).

These examples, which appear to contradict more straightforwardly ‘pacifist’ statements, share some common themes: rejection of abstraction, unwillingness to universalize, opposition to decisions made regardless of context, refusal to answer by invoking a principle. But Bonhoeffer himself does make some general statements: war is always sinful; Christians can never fight in an unjust war; the church can never pray nationalistic prayers; the church can never give its blessing to war. These statements, however, all have a negative form. Bonhoeffer gives no general, positive guidelines for when a Christian could participate in a war. The question of participation can never be resolved by an abstract rule, a moral principle, or

even an utterance of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, treated as a principle. In Bethge's words, Bonhoeffer's was a 'conditional pacifism', he never became a fundamental pacifist (*grundsatzlich Pazifist*) (Bethge, 2000: 127, 153).⁵

The core of Bonhoeffer's mature theological peace ethic can be summarized succinctly. Its *Christological* center is the Christ who calls to personal discipleship and teaches the way of peace in the Sermon on the Mount. As seen in Bonhoeffer's Armistice Day sermon, various passages in the New Testament were invoked in the cause of peace; it is clear, however, that the Sermon on the Mount is the most prominent *scriptural component* of the peace ethic. The *ecclesial component* is equally prominent, with repeated references to the church transcending all national and ethnic tribalism, uniting all Christians in one global community, the one body of the really present, resurrected Christ. Christians 'cannot take up arms against Christ himself—yet this is what they do if they take up arms against one another!' (DBWE 12: 308). This *ecclesial component* is also *doctrinal*, as is particularly evident in Bonhoeffer's rejecting 'orders of creation.' Doctrinal references are also found in statements like this: 'War in its present-day form lays waste to God's creation, and obscures the view of revelation' (DBWE 12: 380).

⁵ See also Bethge, 2000: 431 on Bonhoeffer being 'not in the least fanatical' about conscientious objection and pacifism, who 'opposed any rash Christian pacifism' (233); further, see Bethge: 'Even in this [Fanø] peace sermon Bonhoeffer cannot be placed unequivocally among the supporters of a fundamental and general pacifism,' though he also stated that renunciation of force for the Christian disciple meant renunciation of defense (388).

This understanding of Bonhoeffer's peace ethic means that participating in the political resistance does not entail a movement from 'pacifism' to 'tyrannicide'. Bonhoeffer does not abandon his peace ethic to participate in the attempted coup d'état. To be sure, there are new elements in his later theology—even a qualified reservation about a certain aspect of *Discipleship* as 'trying to live something like a saintly life' (DBWE 8: 486). But there is no wholesale overhaul of his previous theology, nor is there any rejection of the peace ethic in the prison writings. Decisive in Bonhoeffer's commitment to the coup d'état was the conviction that the genocidal war of the Nazi state had created a situation of last resort.

Bonhoeffer's practice of his peace ethic

How did Bonhoeffer actually practice his theological peace ethic? There are seven main aspects.

Opposition to war. Especially in his ecumenical addresses of the 1930s Bonhoeffer argued that opposition to war—that is, not abstract war in general but the very next war that threatened—was nothing less than the contemporary command of God. He used his office in the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches to mobilize churches against war and to work for peace.

Resistance. Bonhoeffer opposed the militarist dictatorship of National Socialism and Hitler from January 1933 onwards. He astutely critiqued the psycho-political dynamics of the *Führerprinzip* in a radio address (DBWE 12: 266-82), and actively resisted the regime both in church politics and in the military-political conspiracy. He risked his life to provide detailed information about the conspiracy to the Allies, and sought their aid in supporting the coup.

Nonviolent resistance. Even prior to Hitler's seizure of power, he tried to organize an intentional Christian community, with a group of his students as the core, based on the Sermon on the Mount (DBWE 10: 41; Bethge, 2000: 208). After Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, one purpose of such a community was to be training in nonviolent resistance. This is clearly documented by his contacts with the Bruderhof community in London in 1934 (DBWE 10: 41-42; DBWE 13: 161-63), by an interview with Herbert Jehle (Rasmussen, 2005: 116-21), and by his 1934 plan to learn nonviolent tactics from Gandhi in India (DBWE 13: 162-63, 225, 229).

Advocating conscientious objection. See, for example, his follow-up plans after his Fanø address (DBWE 13: 289-90). As late as October 1942, while serving in military intelligence, he defended conscientious objection in a conversation with his fiancée (cf. Green, 2005:47), and in the months before his arrest he also defended the position in the last paragraph written for his *Ethics* (DBWE 6: 407).

Work to protect and help victims of the regime. This applied to Jews, to émigrés, and to victims of the Nazi so-called 'euthanasia' program.

Advocate of his Christian peace ethic to his students. The physicist Herbert Jehle was an outstanding example: 'I became a pacifist exclusively through Dietrich' (*Yearbook 2*, 2005:119), he said, and went on to be a leading peace advocate at the highest levels in the United States after the war.

Willingness to suffer and to die. His book *Discipleship* clearly implies this possible outcome of his Christian peace commitment, and it was presupposed in his willingness to return in 1939 from the safety of America to the danger of the conspiracy—a decision he never regretted even when he knew it could cost him his life (DBWE 8: 236).

Theology and political resistance: coup d'état and tyrannicide

By coincidence, Bonhoeffer's public resistance to the National Socialist regime first emerged the day after Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor. In a radio address he warned that the nation's *Führer* (leader) could easily become a *Verführer* (misleader) who idolatrously usurps the place of God (DBWE 12: 280).

Bonhoeffer's resistance to National Socialism has commonly been understood in stages, in the earlier period ecclesial forms of resistance (ecumenical addresses, teaching at the Finkenwalde seminary), in the later period, political resistance (the *Abwehr* conspiracy). These stages, furthermore, were often interpreted according to a threefold schema that Bonhoeffer outlined in 1933 in his essay 'The Church and the Jewish Question': first, questioning the state about whether it was performing its proper function of creating law and order; second, serving the victims of a state's improper use of law and force; third, 'direct political action on the part of the church' (DBWE 12: 365-66). Recent scholarship, especially that of Florian Schmitz and Michael DeJonge, has made a strong case for revising how this resistance is understood (DeJonge, 2017: 207). In particular, DeJonge's *Bonhoeffer on Resistance: The Word against the Wheel* gives a comprehensive analysis of the three phases and six types of Bonhoeffer's resistance to state injustice from 1932 to 1945 (DeJonge, 2018: 9-11).

Here, however, we must focus on the ethical and theological issues involved in conspiracy and tyrannicide. To set the stage, it is enough to say that Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi recruited him to be an agent of the Office of Military Intelligence (*Abwehr*), and also to keep him out of the army. His role can probably best be described as a

courier, using his ecumenical contacts in Britain, the United States, and Geneva to convey information about resistance plans for an overthrow, and to consult with various German groups, Allied church leaders, and American friends like the theologian Paul Lehmann, about plans for post-war peace and reconstruction. Bonhoeffer also served as an informal ethical counselor to Hans von Dohnanyi (Bethge, 2000: 625), a key figure who kept him well informed. For obvious reasons, Bonhoeffer did not commit to writing his thoughts and activities about the conspiracy—that would have been a gift to the Gestapo. We must rely on indirect evidence. But that evidence is clear and convincing.

Two pieces of testimony speak to Bonhoeffer's basic approval of coup d'état strategy. First, Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's closest friend, biographer, and editor, never doubted that Bonhoeffer agreed with the basic aims and methods of the conspiracy, including the killing of Hitler. Nor did he ever suggest that Bonhoeffer was personally involved in attempts on Hitler's life.⁶ At the American Academy of Religion in 1977, he responded to a paper on Bonhoeffer and pacifism, and made two points: 1) there is no *fundamental* change from *Discipleship* to *Ethics*, and therefore treating the author of *Discipleship* as a pacifist who becomes a volunteer for assassinating Adolf Hitler is wrong-headed thinking; 2) the real issue is: 'the murderer had to be stopped'.⁷

⁶ This report is based on a thirty-year professional cooperation with Bethge.

⁷ See the *Newsletter* of the International Bonhoeffer Society, English Language Section, No. 9 (1976), page 3.

Second, the earliest written evidence we have of Bonhoeffer's approval of the conspiracy, and its attempts to kill Hitler, comes from the reports of Bishop George Bell in 1942. During his London pastorate, Bonhoeffer formed a close friendship with Bell, the Anglican Bishop of Chichester, and thus a member of Britain's House of Lords with access to leaders of the government. When Bell visited Sweden in 1942, Bonhoeffer made a forty-eight hour visit to meet him in Sigtuna, **and carrying a list a list of leading members of the conspiracy**. He passed on the request of the conspiracy that the Churchill government publicly announce its willingness to negotiate peace with a new German government, once Hitler and the whole Nazi regime were overthrown. Bell made notes of Bonhoeffer's information in his diary then wrote a memorandum to Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary; Bell published this information in an article right after the war, and again in a 1957 lecture in Bonn (Green, 2015: 203-205). In these documents Bell writes of 'the destruction of the whole Hitler regime, including Himmler, Göring, Goebbels', the opposition's plans 'to destroy Hitler and his regime', and 'the complete elimination of Hitler and Himmler and the whole regime'. Lest anyone doubt Bell's purpose, he states that his article is 'to report from personal knowledge an early stage of the plot of July 20th to destroy Hitler.' 'Destruction', 'destroy', and 'elimination' are the keywords—this is not the language of polite diplomacy. It means precisely what Bethge later reported of Bonhoeffer's attitude: 'the murderer had to be stopped'.

The obvious theological-ethical question to ask is this: given Bonhoeffer's theological peace ethic, how did he understand his own participation in the coup conspiracy, and his agreement with the plan to kill Hitler? As previously stated, the issue is tyrannicide, not murder or assassination. To begin with, in his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer had referred to Hitler in all but name as

‘the tyrannical despiser of humanity’ (DBWE 6: 85f.). In addition, even while writing *Discipleship* at Finkenwalde, he had addressed the issue of tyrannicide. During a lecture on Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession he referred to Aquinas and Scottish Calvinists. Student notes record, ‘Tyrannicide: Thomas: no right to revolution but if the tyrant starts a revolution we must depose him’ (DBWE 14: 338). Furthermore, Bonhoeffer was quite familiar with Lutheran resistance sources (DeJonge, 2017: 190-206).

Against this background, two particularly revealing passages in *Ethics* show how – indirectly, but clearly – Bonhoeffer understood his own activities in the resistance, including his acceptance of the sort of violent bomb attack on Hitler and his staff of the July 20, 1944 coup attempt—its failure led to Bonhoeffer’s poignant July 21 letter (DBWE 8: 485-87), the only one Eberhard Bethge kept for himself.

The first of these revealing statements is found in a 1942 Christmas meditation Bonhoeffer wrote entitled ‘After Ten Years’. He gave it to colleagues in conspiracy Hans von Dohnanyi, Hans Oster, and Eberhard Bethge (DBWE 8:37-52). It incorporated several pages from his *Ethics* manuscript ‘Ethics as Formation’. Written after a year of war, Bonhoeffer described 1940 as a time of saints and villains who emerge from divine and demonic depths (DBWE 6:76), actors in ‘the huge masquerade of evil’ (DBWE 8:38). Then he profiled six traditional ethical postures which had failed to deal with the reality of a decade of National Socialism. Reason, ethical fanaticism, conscience, duty, absolute freedom, private virtue—these are ethics of good people, but they *‘are not sufficient for the present struggle’* (DBWE 6:80, italics added). The excerpt, entitled ‘Who Stands Firm?’ concludes with this added passage:

Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call. Where are these responsible ones? (DBWE 8: 40).

Bonhoeffer answers his own question: in contrast to 'the man of duty,' who will end up doing his duty 'also to the devil', the responsible people who stand firm are those who 'venture a free action that rests solely on their own responsibility, the only sort of action that can meet evil at its heart and overcome it' (DBWE 6: 79). Given that conspirators are the readers of this Christmas meditation, we have every reason to believe that 'meeting evil at its heart' is a reference to the coup conspiracy and getting rid of the Hitler regime.

The second revealing passage in *Ethics* supports this reading. It appears in the manuscript 'History and Good [2]', where Bonhoeffer elaborates his ethic of free responsible action in four themes (DBWE 6: 257-89; cf. DBWE 6: 12-14). The first theme is a key concept throughout Bonhoeffer's theology, *vicarious representative action* (*Stellvertretung*). It refers fundamentally to Jesus Christ: in God's becoming human, and in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God takes a free initiative and responsibility to reconcile and recreate humanity; God acts on behalf of, and for the sake of, humanity. Accordingly, Bonhoeffer holds that "the human ethical analogy is acting responsibly on behalf of others and equally on behalf of communities to which we belong. Opposing National Socialism and risking his life for peace and the future of his country and Europe was for Bonhoeffer vicarious representative action" (DBWE 6: 12; cf. DBWE 1: 120, fn.29).

The second theme is *correspondence with reality*, action fitting to its context. In discussing politics and statecraft, Bonhoeffer argues that this is where “responsible action reaches its most profound expression” (DBWE 6: 272), where the fundamental necessities of human life are at stake. Such situations of last resort transcend all laws, rules, norms, and principles, and appeal to “the free responsibility of the one who acts . . . not bound by any law. . . . In politics this *ultima ratio* is war, but it can also be deception or breaking a treaty for the sake of one’s own life necessities” (DBWE 6: 273). It can also be tyrannicide, and coup d’etat.

The third theme is willingness to take on guilt. Tyrannicide is contrary to the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount, yet Bonhoeffer refrained from any self-justification. Rather, he saw his role in the conspiracy as an act of repentance, and as accepting the guilt of his church and his nation. Bonhoeffer concludes: ‘The man who acts out of free responsibility is justified before others by dire necessity; before himself he is acquitted by his conscience, but before God he hopes only for grace’ (DBWE 6: 283 and fn.138). Here Bonhoeffer’s German uses self-involving language that comes closest to a direct autobiographical statement.

Freedom is the fourth component of responsible action, which is modeled on God’s freedom for humanity in Jesus Christ, and is reflected in human freedom to act for the sake of the neighbor and the good of the community. This includes freedom to risk and to venture in the midst of the uncertainties of history.

If, for Bonhoeffer, conspiracy and tyrannicide aim at the restoration of peace, it is not far-fetched to read his theological-ethical account of the structure of responsible life as part of his peace ethic—or, at least, as closely related to it. Discussing responsibility as *Stellvertretung* grounded the presentation in Christology, God-becoming-human. Dealing with actual worldly

reality in extreme conditions leads not to an “end justifies the means” argument but to consideration of law, human and divine. Breaking the law leads to an analysis of conscience, and ultimately to the grace of God. In short, just as Bonhoeffer’s peace ethic is rooted in Christology, ecclesiology, scripture, and doctrine, so his approach to tyrannicide and coup d’etat is likewise thoroughly theological.

Conclusion: Bonhoeffer’s ‘pacifism’ and resistance

How best to summarize Bonhoeffer’s overall position, in his specific historical context, on peace and war, on resistance and tyrannicide? It would be a serious misunderstanding to read Bonhoeffer’s statement that ‘you can’t give a final answer to the question of whether a Christian can participate in war’, or the statement that he had not ‘made up his mind about participating in a war under different circumstances’, and then conclude that he stood in a neutral, uncommitted place, above the fray. It was not as if the choice about war and violence was always an open question for Bonhoeffer, which could be decided one way or the other. Rather, his default position is against war, and for peace; for nonviolence against violence; for the church condemning all war as sinful rather than justifying it. In other words, his peace ethic led his contemporaries who knew him personally to call him some sort of pacifist.

Karl Barth, later discussing in the *Church Dogmatics* when tyrannicide would be justified, wrote that Bonhoeffer belonged to the Christian circles who gave a definite positive answer in regard to Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer, he said, ‘was really a pacifist on the basis of his understanding of the gospel. But the fact remains that he did not give a negative answer to the question’ (Barth, 1961: 449).

Eberhard Bethge wrote that ‘after meeting Lasserre the question of . . . the biblical injunction of peace and of the concrete steps to be taken against warlike impulses never left him again’. But he was a ‘conditional pacifist’, who never became a thoroughgoing, unconditional pacifist, a *grundsätzlich Pazifist* (Bethge, 2000: 153, 127).

Similarly, Franz Hildebrandt, a lifelong pacifist and Bonhoeffer’s close friend, is a unique witness. When the news of his friend’s death also informed him that Bonhoeffer was involved in the conspiracy, he was surprised (Green, 2005:46). But when later asked in an interview about Bonhoeffer’s pacifism he replied: ‘It was never a pacifism unqualified and held-to in principle’ (Kelley interview, cited Green, 2015:208).

Herbert Jehle, the physicist who attended Bonhoeffer’s lectures in Berlin, visited him frequently in London from Cambridge, and also visited him in Finkenwalde, said ‘I became a pacifist exclusively through Dietrich’. In an interview he consistently spoke of Bonhoeffer as a pacifist without qualification (Rasmussen, 2005:119). But when his widow was asked about Jehle’s attitude to Bonhoeffer in the conspiracy, she answered for him vigorously and without hesitation: ‘Oh, he had to do it!’ (Green, 2005:46). In other words, Jehle, too, agreed with Bonhoeffer that, in Nazism and Hitler, Bonhoeffer and the coup planners faced an ultimate, last resort situation.

Willem Visser ‘t Hooft, who became General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, reported that in 1939 Bonhoeffer discussed with him whether he should register as a conscientious objector in the impending war. To the question, how did it come about that he became actively involved in the 20th July 1944 plot, Visser ‘t Hooft answered: ‘The very

conviction which had made him a man of peace, led him into active resistance' (Zimmermann & Smith, 1966: 194).

These contemporary witnesses all refer to Bonhoeffer's 'pacifism'. Bethge and Hildebrandt are quick to qualify it. So 'conditional pacifism' is probably as good a short phrase as any to summarize Bonhoeffer's position. But unfortunately 'pacifism' does not point to the pervasive Christian foundation of his position as does the construct 'theological peace ethic'. His peace ethic cannot be understood apart from its Christological, scriptural, ecclesial, and doctrinal dimensions. Nor can his attitude to the coup d'état conspiracy and tyrannicide be understood apart from his theological ethic of free responsibility in which it is embedded. Therefore we must combine the two phrases and say that Bonhoeffer's Christian peace ethic was a conditional pacifism.

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