Bonhoeffer, Kierkegaard, and Conditional Pacifism

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Christian pacifist who believed Jesus Christ taught nonviolence, yet Bonhoeffer was involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. How did Bonhoeffer justify to himself his participation in the plot?

1. Introduction

In Clifford Green's essay "Bonhoeffer's Christian Peace Ethic, Conditional Pacifism, and Resistance", Green describes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's general position on war: "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" (Green 2019, p. 354). This paints a strong pacifist picture of Bonhoeffer; however, as acknowledged by Green and others, Bonhoeffer was involved in a plot to kill Hitler (the July 20 Plot). Scholars have wrestled ever since with explaining how a pacifist could justify, at least to himself, being involved in a violent conspiracy. Green's conclusion is that Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist, at least a traditional one. Green labels Bonhoeffer's peace ethic as "conditional pacifism".[1] In other words, it is not absolute but qualified, allowing for exceptions. Nevertheless, I argue that the term "conditional pacifism" is misleading because it implies that Bonhoeffer's faith can be reduced to a set of moral rules and principles. His faith is not a system of principles, no matter how nuanced, that one simply applies to concrete situations.[2] It is faith in Jesus Christ, involving, Bonhoeffer believes, a direct call from God. This resembles and is influenced by Kierkegaard's existentialism, which separates ethics and faith. A Kierkegaardian framework like this offers a better explanation for how a pacifist like Bonhoeffer could justify participating in a violent plot.[3]

2. Bonhoeffer's Pacifism

On one level, Bonhoeffer certainly reads like a principled pacifist. Commenting on Matthew 5:9, which says "Blessed are the peacemakers", Bonhoeffer writes, "They renounce violence and strife. Those things never help the cause of Christ. Christ's kingdom is a realm of peace, and those in Christ's community greet each other with a greeting of peace…They renounce self-assertion and are silent in the face of hatred and injustice. That is how they overcome evil with good."[4] If we are to take this commentary as representative of his ethics, then renouncing violence appears to be an absolute imperative for the Christian life.

Charles Marsh describes the evolution of Bonhoeffer's views on violence in the biography *A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Marsh 2014, pp. 214–16). Early on, Bonhoeffer was clearly not a pacifist. His dissertation justified warfare (Green 2019, p. 345), and his Barcelona sermons contained elements of just war theory. Marsh writes, "As an assistant pastor in Barcelona…he had blithely intoned the rhetoric of blood, soil, and fatherland, paying homage to the old Germanic war gods" (Marsh 2014, p. 215). However, on his first trip to America, Bonhoeffer met the pacifists Jean Lasserre and Franz Hildebrandt and eventually because of their influence abandoned his just war beliefs. Marsh writes, "These encounters had awakened Bonhoffer to an intimate relationship with scripture that privileged Jesus' moral teachings and its fierce summation in the Sermon on the Mount" (Marsh 2014, p. 215). After this, Bonhoeffer started a community based on the Sermon on the Mount (Finkenwalde), influenced others to embrace pacifism, and attempted to avoid conscription so as not to shed blood in service of the Nazis (Marsh 2014, pp. 214–16).

However, Bonhoeffer participated in a plot to kill Hitler with a bomb placed in a suitcase. Even though he did not handle the explosives himself, he joined in the planning and gave it his blessing. Marsh writes: “Responsible action meant killing the madman, even though such action violated God’s commandment not to kill. How could it be otherwise? In the face of Hitler’s atrocities, the way of nonviolence would bring inevitable guilt—both for the ‘uncontested’ injustices and for the innocent lives that might have been saved. To act responsibly in these circumstances meant killing the madman if one could, even though such action violated God’s commandment not to kill.”[5] Green cites several witnesses who testify to Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the plot. These witnesses frame it as a choice of last resort consistent with his character and religious convictions.[6]

Green writes, “Bonhoeffer was not a pacifist in principle, though he was certainly opposed to Hiter’s war. Rather, his Christian peace ethic—note the adjective—was explicitly theological, clearly distinguished from humanitarian peace advocacy which he called ‘secular pacifism’)” (Green 2019, p. 345). Green calls Bonhoeffer a “conditional pacifist”, embracing pacifism with exceptions.[7] However, pacifism is a term that applies to principled positions that condemn war and violence in varying degrees, so it is unclear what Green means calling Bonhoeffer a conditional pacifist but denying that he was a pacifist in principle. John Howard Yoder describes over twenty different types of religious pacifism, including absolute pacifism, case-based pacifism, and pacifism of the messianic community. An absolute pacifist believes that nonviolence is a moral duty without exception (Yoder 1971, pp. 32–37). Based on Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the conspiracy, he is clearly not an absolute pacifist. A case-based pacifist (just war pacifism) believes that wars are usually immoral (on principle) but that there might be exceptions (Yoder 1971, pp. 22–28). This seems closest to Green’s “conditional pacifism”. A Messianic pacifist believes that pacifism is based on what Jesus taught and on the way he lived and died (Yoder 1971, pp. 133–38). Such a pacifist follows Jesus as Lord in a community of disciples. Yoder writes, “[This message of peacemaking] has come to us not on a tablet of stone chiseled by the finger of God alone on Sinai, or from the mouth of a prophet or an oracle. Instead, the telling has come in the full humanity of a unique and yet complete human being” (Yoder 1971, p. 134). Perhaps Bonhoeffer is a Messianic pacifist, but it is unclear how such a pacifist could justify being a co-conspirator in an assassination plot at the same time. For this explanation, we need the help of Kierkegaard.

3. Kierkegaard and the Knight of Faith

Kierkegaard’s influence on Bonhoeffer is widely recognized. He called Kierkegaard one of the great Christians among the ranks of Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Barth (Tietz 2012, pp. 46–47). He even recommended Kierkegaard to his fiancé as an antidote for bad theology (Kelley 2017, p. 145). Christiane Tietz catalogs the many ways that Kierkegaard’s influence appears in Bonhoeffer’s writings. For example, in a sermon on Christology, he uses Kierkegaard’s teachings on silence to support the practice of silence when engaged in theology (Tietz 2012, p. 47). In his first dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer engages critically with Kierkegaard’s concept of love, both agreeing and disagreeing with different aspects of it (Tietz 2012, p. 48). In his second dissertation, *Act and Being*, Bonhoeffer cites Kierkegaard in his critique of idealism (Tietz 2012, p. 49).

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard distinguishes between the ethical and an act of faith, the universal and the particular. He says, “Faith is exactly this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal” (Kierkegaard 2024, p. 53). This is the teleological suspension of the ethical, which Kierkegaard famously illustrates in the act of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac to God in obedience to God’s direct command. The universal declares that fathers should not kill their children. In Kierkegaard’s words, “There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham’s life than this, that the father shall love the son” (Kierkegaard 2024, p. 57). But God called him to surrender his son, and Abraham had to “transgress” the universal to be obedient. “Why did

Abraham do it?" Kierkegaard answers, "For God's sake" (Kierkegaard 2024, p. 57). "How did Abraham exist? He believed. This is the paradox by which he comes to stand upon the apex, which he cannot make clearer for any other; for the paradox is that he as the single individual places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute" (Kierkegaard 2024, p. 58). Geffrey B. Kelley explains: "[Kierkegaard] eschews any retreat into the more abstract 'universal' which promises security and even requires a certain, admirable courage. But in a given moment, a more pressing duty can shatter the complacency engendered by attachment to universals despite all their attractiveness and security" (Kelley 2017, p. 158). Moral universals are impersonal abstractions. They enjoy widespread popularity, and breaking them results in social disapproval. Nevertheless, authentic existence is not found in abstraction but in relating to God in faith. Kierkegaard says the one who abandons the universal for the intimate relationship "shall glimpse the marvelous glory that this knight achieves—that he becomes God's confidant, the Lord's friend, that—to speak purely humanly—he says 'You' to God in Heaven, while even the tragic hero addresses him only in the third person" (Kierkegaard 2024, p. 75). For Kierkegaard, the knight of faith is distinguished from the tragic hero in that the former lives authentically via a direct relationship with God through faith.

The tragic hero makes a great sacrifice, maybe even the ultimate sacrifice, but does so for the sake of the universal, recognizing that some duties override others in a logical system of principles. Kierkegaard uses Agamemnon as an example of a tragic hero; he sacrifices his daughter to Artemis in exchange for a favorable wind that will send his fleet of warriors to Troy. In this, Agamemnon recognizes that his duty to his country overrides his duty to his family. The sacrifice is tragic but "ethical" insofar as it is performed for the sake of a universal. Society honors him for it because they understand its reasons and how difficult it must be for him. Abraham, as a knight of faith, has no such honor. Michael Banner writes, "Abraham is not one of those figures who, finding themselves tragically caught in a conflict between two duties, heroically resolves this conflict in favor of the higher duty" (Banner 2009, p. 83). Kierkegaard says, "The temptation is the ethical itself." In other words, Abraham must be unethical, transgressing the universal. Abraham chooses faith over ethics. In this, Abraham is greater than the tragic hero but only because of faith.

4. Discipleship and the Knight of Faith

For Bonhoeffer, Christian discipleship is absolute obedience, which he calls "simple obedience" (Bonhoeffer 2015b, pp. 41–47). It involves living by faith, i.e., following the commands of the resurrected and living Jesus Christ, who Bonhoeffer believes is the mediator between God and humanity, the source of all moral obligation. Geffrey B. Kelley says, "Bonhoeffer noted that Jesus offers no set program, no set of principles, no absolutized dogmas, no new set of laws that preserved purity of doctrine. Rather, such grace demands 'nothing other than being bound to Jesus Christ alone'".[8] Christine Schliesser says, "Christ's call for single-minded obedience revokes any other elements that hold claims on humans such as natural, ethical, or religious reflection" (Schliesser 2008, p. 110). Christ's call is a teleological suspension of the ethical, the particular overriding the universal.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer explains that following Jesus is an act of faith that gives up something that is only apparently good for something that is actually good. He writes, "The disciple is thrown out of the relative security of life into complete insecurity (which in truth is absolute security and protection in community with Jesus). Out of the foreseeable and calculable realm (which in truth is unreliable) into the completely unforeseeable, coincidental realm (which in truth is the only necessary and reliable one)" (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 19). Bonhoeffer explains that this means giving up the security of a universal code of ethics for the immediacy of the direct call of Jesus, who is the Son of God; Christian discipleship is following this person. Without Jesus, he says, one might trust in God, but such trust is ideology not discipleship. He writes, "One enters into a relationship with an idea by way of knowledge, enthusiasm, perhaps even by carrying it out, but never by personal obedient discipleship" (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 19).

Bonhoeffer illustrates this with the story of Peter walking on the water. In Matthew 14:22–33, Peter is in a boat with the other disciples caught in rough waters. Jesus walks out to them on the water and calls to Peter to step out of the boat and meet him on the water. Peter makes it a few steps before falling into the sea. Bonhoeffer explains, “If [Peter] had not gotten out, he would not have learned to believe. His situation on the tempestuous sea is completely impossible and, ethically, simply irresponsible, but it has to happen for him to believe. The road to faith passes through obedience to Christ’s call” (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 23).

Bonhoeffer says the direct call of Jesus can be disruptive to our closest relationships. He cites Luke 14:26, which says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 59). As an illustration, Bonhoeffer discusses the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is called to sacrifice Isaac even though Isaac is God’s gift to him. This call is specific to Abraham. Nobody else hears it. Nobody else can support him. Nobody else can emulate him. Bonhoeffer writes, “Against every natural immediacy, against every ethical immediacy, against every religious immediacy, he obeys God’s word. He brings his son to be sacrificed” (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 64). In short, the call of discipleship is outside the realm of the ethical and overrides social and moral norms. It is helpful to compare Isaac to God’s moral law, whether this means the Mosaic law or something more transcendent. The law is a gift from God, much like Isaac was to Abraham, but the picture Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer present is that the true gift is God himself. The authority rests in the one who establishes the law not in the law itself.

Bonhoeffer frames the notion of obedience in terms of responsibility. In his famous essay, “After Ten Years”, which he wrote near the end of his life, Bonhoeffers says, “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” (Bonhoeffer 2015a). In this passage, Bonhoeffer contrasts true responsibility with elements of the so-called “ethical life”. First, he contrasts it with reason. One would think that ethical reasoning would be important for a Christian, but Bonhoeffer says there is reasoning that is submitted to God and reasoning that is not.[9] Bonhoeffer says in *Discipleship*, “A pure heart is the simple heart of a child, who does not know about good and evil…the heart in which the will of Jesus rules instead of one’s own conscience” (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 76). Recall that the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) was the choice to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Perhaps this means humanity’s first sin was autonomous (independent) ethical reasoning.

Second, he contrasts responsibility with principles.[10] For him, a principle-based moral system is about self-justification, not obedience to Christ. Having a tidy set of principles is a convenient way of rationalizing one’s disobedience or avoiding the discomfort of having to live the unpredictable life of following Jesus’ commands. Principles, he says, construct a false law, which is an obstacle to Christian obedience (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 45). He explains that someone might take on a vow of poverty but do it for the sake of an ideal not for the sake of Christ, and rather than having a sanctifying effect, he says, “It could be that they do not become free from themselves, but even more trapped in themselves” (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 47). A false law lacks life-giving meaning, which comes only in the life of faith. In his day, he thinks principles have failed Germany and the church. He says, “The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion.”[11]

Third, he contrasts responsibility with conscience. In this negative sense, conscience is the autonomy of the self, the faculty of discernment acting independently of God. This is the presumptuous prerogative of the self, conceiving of itself as the judge of right and wrong. However, conscience can be correctly deployed when the soul listens in faith for Christ’s call. Schliesser writes, “Bonhoeffer by no means negates the conscience’s right for existence; however according

to him it needs to be freed by Christ who then becomes the point of unity in one's existence. While the freed conscience will still constitute the call to one's unity with oneself, this unity is no longer realized in autonomy but in fellowship with Christ, who has become my conscience" (Schliesser 2008, p. 140). In Nazi Germany, he thinks a man of conscience will be ineffective or will, in despair, stop listening to his conscience.[12]

Fourth, Bonhoeffer contrasts responsibility with freedom. For him, freedom can be good or bad. The bad kind occurs when the self asserts its independence from God, which may include the intemperance of more obvious sins, such as greed, lust, and gluttony, or the less obvious ones that hide themselves in the guise of religion, such as the self-righteousness of the Pharisees critiqued by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer considers self-righteousness an obstacle to simple obedience. He says, "Obedience to Jesus' call is never an autonomous human deed" (Bonhoeffer 2015b, p. 46). In "After Ten Years", he writes, "Only today are Germans beginning to discover what free responsibility means. It is founded in a God who calls for the free venture of faith to responsible action and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the one who on account of such action becomes a sinner." These words are likely aimed at himself and his co-conspirators.

Finally, he contrasts responsibility with virtue, which he calls "private virtuousness". By this he likely means the self-focused preoccupation with one's character, especially as it relates to etiquette and personal success. A focus on one's character can be an obstacle to being obedient to God's call when that call requires personal sacrifice. Bonhoeffer writes, "This or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him."[13] The virtues that may have been well-suited for days of peace were unhelpful in Nazi Germany.

What is true responsibility for Bonhoeffer? Christine Schliesser analyzes responsibility in terms of the tension between obedience and freedom, and it is modeled in Christ. She writes, "Jesus stands before God as both the obedient one and the free one. As the obedient one Jesus is acting in blind compliance with the will of his father, and as the free one he joyfully affirms his father's will. Obedience knows what is good and acts in accordance with it, freedom ventures the concrete decision and leaves the judgment of good and evil to God" (Schliesser 2008, p. 144). Joshua A. Kaiser writes, "Jesus Christ is free in that he is not bound by any predetermined course of moral action and is at liberty to reflect on a situation and respond accordingly, as he did when deciding to perform a Sabbath healing for the woman who had been sick for eighteen years" (Kaiser 2015, p. 56). Jesus demonstrates how obedience to God comes with a freedom of action that transcends abstract principles. Responsibility is not blind devotion to ethics but freedom to follow God's call in the most difficult and complex situations.

5. Bonhoeffer as a Knight of Faith

Kierkegaard helps us understand how Bonhoeffer might justify to himself being both a pacifist and a "responsible one" who participates in a plot to assassinate Hitler. On the level of the universal and the ethical, Bonhoeffer preaches nonviolence and condemns all war as sin. This is the peacemaking ethics of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This is on the level of moral abstraction. But on the level of the particular, Bonhoeffer believes God may call his knights of faith to specific acts of obedience, which may not fit so neatly into an ethics of nonviolence. After all, faith is faith, not ethics. This is Kierkegaard's (and Bonhoeffer's) teleological suspension of the ethical, in which ethics yields to faith.

Is Bonhoeffer actually a knight of faith? Did God actually call him to participate in the plot? Unfortunately, this question is beyond the scope of the essay.[14] Even if God did so, Kierkegaard says observers cannot know whether the knight of faith hears God accurately; we are not privy to

the call. At most, we can evaluate a knight's actions according to the universal, but Bonhoeffer must work out his own faith with fear and trembling and accept the consequences, which he did. Fear and trembling are the burdens of a disciple of Christ. Schliesser says, "In the moment of its performance one delivers one's deed entirely up to God. Not only is this the decisive difference between ideological action that can be judged according to its own guiding principles and action in accordance with reality, i.e., with Christ, but it is intrinsically connected with Bonhoeffer's already addressed concept of the Christian's complete ignorance of his or her own good or evil. The responsible person has thus no final moral security concerning his or her deed but has to rely solely on God's grace" (Schliesser 2008, p. 134). Bonhoeffer may have believed that he was obeying God, but he may have been wrong; in fact, it is possible that he let his ethical reasoning interfere with his faith.[15] I do not take a position on whether he got it right or wrong. The argument I make in this essay is simply that it seems likely, based on what he says about discipleship and discerning God's call, that he believed he was acting in obedience.

What does Bonhoeffer say about hearing God's call? In his essay "Ethics as Formation", Bonhoeffer says, "Because of knowing and having God, this person clings to the commandments, the judgment, and the mercy of God that proceed anew each day from the mouth of God. Not fettered by principles but bound by love for God, this person is liberated from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 81). In this passage, Bonhoeffer refers to a close loving relationship with God that frees one from cold law-following. But how does one cultivate a loving relationship with God? How does one hear what proceeds from "the mouth of God"? The answer is by formation, by being formed in the likeness of Christ. Bonhoeffer says, "This does not mean that the teachings of Christ or so-called Christian principles should be applied directly to the world in order to form the world according to them. Formation occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen" (Bonhoeffer 2005, p. 93). So, the life of a disciple of Jesus is a type of character formation, not simply imitating the character of a virtuous person but being conformed to a Christological reality, a supernatural, but very real, transformation. In Aristotle's virtue ethics, one follows the example of a virtuous person, but for Bonhoeffer, our role model is not just a person but the center of reality, a divine person with whom one can have a day-to-day relationship.

Bonhoeffer believes God's call comes through prayerfully meditating on the Bible. Joshua A. Kaiser explains that Bonhoeffer does not mean that the Bible is a book of rules. Kaiser says, "[Bonhoeffer] is worried about people looking to biblical commandments as universal ethical norms and uncritically applying them to contemporary situations…God's commandment is not static, but living and active and coming to humanity ever anew" (Kaiser 2015, p. 130). Bonhoeffer believes that a prayerful and spiritual believer, reading the Bible with an open mind, will encounter God, communicating his commands to them (Kaiser 2015, p. 142). Kaiser writes, "[Bonhoeffer] suggests that while God has a directly applicable commandment for each situation, perceiving that commandment requires close attention and study" (Kaiser 2015, p. 141).

Despite writing about discerning God's call, Bonhoeffer wrestled with discerning it in his own life. For example, prior to returning to Germany for the last time, Bonhoeffer records in his journals his doubts about his decision to come to the United States. Kaiser says that it is clear in his journal that he felt regret the moment he landed in the United States in June of 1939. Kaiser writes "At one point, Bonhoeffer even wonders if the intense homesickness he feels is a 'sign from above' intended to guide him to a decision to return soon to Germany" (Kaiser 2015, p. 9). After several other entries on the matter, Bonhoeffer explains how he finally made up his mind. Kaiser writes, "In a diary entry dated 26 June 1939, he mentions that he 'happened to read' 2 Timothy 4:21, in which Paul closes the letter by writing to Timothy: 'come before the winter.' Bonhoeffer immediately applied this verse to his own situation and believed that it might be telling him something about the timing of his return to Germany. In the final lines of his diary entry he writes: 'Come before the winter'—it is not a misuse of the Scripture if I allow this to be said to *me*. If God gives me the grace for that'" (Kaiser 2015, p. 118). In short, Bonhoeffer lived with the belief that

God communicates his will to specific people and actions. Thus, it seems plausible that his discerning faith led him to believe God was calling him to participate in the plot, too.

Bonhoeffer's courage in the face of great evil has inspired many people, but the teleological suspension of the ethical has a dark and dangerous side to it. As Petra Brown describes, "Far from Christ's command to love her enemies, the reader who turns to Bonhoeffer to find a model of Christian action applicable to a state of exception may well find herself endorsing violence in the name of Christ" (Brown 2019, p. 191). This is deeply troubling and should give anyone pause before holding Bonhoeffer up as a moral role model or making a movie about him.[16] Yet just as the story of Abraham and Isaac has inspired generations of the religious faithful and has not led to an epidemic of child sacrifice among faithful Bible readers, so also the story of Bonhoeffer may inspire many nonviolent acts of faith for generations to come. Still, we must tell the whole story: on the level of ethics, Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, but he also was a man of faith—a faith that transcends ethics and listens for God's calling.

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