



## Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Struggle for Christian-Jewish Reconciliation

31.08.2007 | Moses, John

**John Moses, an Australian scholar of modern German history, traces the development of German Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's views on the Jews and Judaism.**

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Struggle for Christian-Jewish Reconciliation

**John A. Moses**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been celebrated as the most significant Protestant theologian since Martin Luther. This is interesting because in one major sense they differed dramatically. Whereas Luther in his old age became virulently anti-Jewish and advocated killing them if they would not convert, Bonhoeffer developed a revolutionary theology of Christian-Jewish reconciliation. This can be investigated in his book *Ethics*, drafted between the end of 1940 and his arrest by the Nazis in April 1943. It is currently available in English.

Let it be said frankly at the outset: All Christian Churches were to some degree anti-Judaistic. The best thing a Jew could do was to convert as soon as possible. The German Lutherans even had a *Judenmission* in the mid-nineteenth century precisely with this agenda in mind. Paradoxically, the German empire founded by Otto von Bismarck in 1871 granted complete emancipation to Jews, i.e. full citizenship rights, but in that empire anti-Semitism flourished. There was a spate of anti-Semitic writing from people like the Hamburg journalist Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904) and the renegade Englishman and naturalised German, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, (1855-1927), Richard Wagner's son-in-law, to name two of the more prominent. There was even the court preacher Adolf Stöcker (1835-1909) who founded an anti-Semitic party in 1878.

All these people were read avidly by the young Adolf Hitler. None of his ideas were new, not even the concept of annihilation of the Jews. Hitler simply imbibed them from 19th century popular, i.e. non-scholarly, rantings of fanatics. However, even a highly regarded scholar such as the celebrated Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-1896) was extremely anti-Semitic, coining the chilling phrase, 'The Jews are our misfortune'.

In the Lutheran Church, anti-Judaism was paradigmatic. Jews were condemned to wander the earth in dissolution because they rejected Christ. Their only salvation lay in conversion. This was the world in which the young Bonhoeffer grew up. However, his family was liberal enough to allow his twin sister, Sabine, to marry a 'baptised' Jew, the jurist Gerhard Leibholz. But the young pastor Bonhoeffer declined to take the funeral service for Leibholz's unbaptised father, something he later bitterly regretted.

But Bonhoeffer changed dramatically. This is partially explained by his sojourn as a postdoctoral student at Union Theological Seminary in New York 1930-31, where he first met black students and learned first-hand about the race problem in the USA. Bonhoeffer's exposure to black Christianity, in particular at the large Harlem Abyssinian Baptist church, brought him to a totally new appreciation of black spirituality. He became, for example, an avid collector of records of Negro spirituals. As well, through his friendship with the French student, Jean Lasserre, Bonhoeffer

gained the insight that any theology which prioritised one nation over another was totally irreconcilable with the teachings of Jesus in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew, Chapters 5-7). God was both colour blind and, in principle, international. Jesus came to redeem *all* humanity regardless of race.

Consequently, when Hitler seized power in January 1933, Bonhoeffer immediately spoke out. He first repudiated the *Führer's* demand that all Germans submit their conscience to him by saying openly that there was only one *Führer* who could demand that - Jesus Christ. Then as soon as the Nazis brought in their infamous Aryan legislation depriving Jews of citizenship rights, he published the paper, 'The Church and the Jewish Question' (June, 1933). Here Bonhoeffer refuted the State's right to persecute anybody on the basis of religion or race. Bonhoeffer spelled out quite clearly that any government that did such a thing was not legitimate. The true role of the State was to protect all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation.

And then Bonhoeffer made three demands on the Church in this situation. First, it had the right to call the State to account for its illegal treatment of a minority; secondly it had the duty to offer succour to all citizens who were discriminated against by the State's illegal action, indeed to bind up the wounds, as he put it, of those who fell under the wheels of the State. Finally, he wrote: 'The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel *but to put a spoke in the wheel itself*. Such action would be direct political action...'

Here is the very first indication that there should be vigorous resistance to the Nazis because of their Jewish policy. Jewish writers have certainly picked up on this but have been disappointed at those sections of the address that revealed Bonhoeffer's deep seated anti- Judaistic theology. Indeed, he said that Jews had, as God's 'chosen people', nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross and that therefore they had to bear the curse for this action through a long history of suffering. So the Jews were a people both 'loved and punished' by God. In this regard, Bonhoeffer in 1933 had not advanced much beyond Martin Luther. Salvation lay in conversion.

However, the more drastic Nazi anti-Semitic behaviour became, the more pro-Jewish Bonhoeffer's understanding developed. For example, on 23 August 1935, Bonhoeffer appealed to the Church to apply the principles of the 'Good Samaritan' to the persecuted Jews. The service of the Church must be directed to all who suffered violence and injustice. Here Bonhoeffer cited the Book of Proverbs 31:8: 'Open thy mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate'. Then the Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels ordered a pogrom against Jews, destroying synagogues and Jewish shops on the night of 9-10 November 1938, the so-called 'Night of the Broken Glass'. Bonhoeffer reacted by pointing out, 'If today the Synagogues burn, tomorrow the Churches, too, will be set alight'.

What we see happening in Bonhoeffer's mind as a reaction to Nazi Jewish policy is a clear reversal of the traditional Christian criticism of the Jews to a criticism of the Church for its anti-Semitism. Indeed, the Church must now fully take the part of the persecuted Jews, who are the brothers of Jesus Christ, and appreciate the significance that his people had for him.

By mid-1939, Bonhoeffer was in despair that he could do anything more to convince his brother pastors 'to open thy mouth for the dumb', and he decided to leave Germany for New York again to teach theology and work among the exiled Jews. After two weeks, Bonhoeffer reversed his decision and returned home to continue the struggle. His thought was that if he were to have any credibility as an opponent of the Nazis, he had to both witness and act against them alongside his fellow subjects at home. He then, via the good offices of his two like-minded brothers-in-law who were high ranking public servants, joined Admiral Canaris' department of military counter-intelligence (*die Abwehr*) to become a double agent. Canaris, a decided opponent of Hitler, employed Bonhoeffer to travel abroad, ostensibly to gather information useful to German intelligence. In reality, Bonhoeffer used his pass into neutral and friendly foreign countries to assist

Jews to escape and to keep up links with the offices of the ecumenical committee for refugee services in Geneva.

While in Geneva Bonhoeffer first learned of the existence of a concentration camp in the south of France at Gurs, where by October 1940 more than 6,000 Jews had been interned. Then, after the German attack on Russia (22 June 1941), there began the first deportations of Jews from Berlin to Poland (16 October). At this point, no one apart from the SS leaders knew the fate of the Jews. Admiral Canaris' bureau was not informed. But the mere fact that Jews were being deported en masse from Europe led Bonhoeffer to revolutionary theological reflections. These were written as part of his planned study of Protestant ethics.

*Ethics* contains two crucial sections for our understanding of Bonhoeffer's theological revolution. First he indicts his own Church for its failure to stand up for the Jews - indeed its betrayal of its responsibilities to the oppressed as expressed in the Bible. *It was guilty of the blood of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.* And in a remarkable passage, Bonhoeffer affirms that the driving out of Jews from Europe was tantamount to the driving out of Christ from Europe, because Jesus was a Jew.

The point is that here Bonhoeffer is not just taking the part of 'baptised' Jews but of all Jews. He expresses for the first time unequivocal solidarity with the Jews. And, secondly, this leads to a completely new theology that demands the Church embrace the Synagogue, virtually in ecumenical brotherhood, since the Church is an offshoot of the Synagogue. God did not transfer his Covenant with the Jews after the Crucifixion. The New Covenant forged on Calvary with the followers of Jesus of Nazareth exists side by side with that forged on Sinai.

In a word, Bonhoeffer saw the Church and the Synagogue derived from the same root and thus locked in a community of fate with the same divine commission for the healing of the world and both under the same judgment for their respective sins of omission and commission. It took the Lutheran Church some time to take on board Bonhoeffer's 'confession of guilt'. However, by 27 April 1950, the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany at Berlin-Weissensee resolved:

*... We state that by omission and silence we became implicated before the God of mercy in the outrage which has been perpetrated against the Jews by people of our nation ... We ask all Christians to disassociate themselves from all anti-Semitism and earnestly resist it, whenever it stirs again, and to encounter Jews and Jewish Christians in a brotherly spirit ... We pray to the Lord of mercy that he may bring about the Day of Fulfillment when we will be praising the triumph of Jesus Christ together with the saved Israel. (Matthew D. Hockenos, A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, Appendix 8).*

Finally, while this statement falls disappointingly short of Bonhoeffer's position in *Ethics*, which does not assume the eventual conversion of Jews, it is an advance on the previous hesitancy of the German Lutheran leadership. Now, in place of Christian-Jewish hostility, a dialogue of equal partners is the order of the day. Bonhoeffer's contribution to this new phase of Christian-Jewish relations has been inestimable.

Dr. John Moses, an Anglican priest, is Adjunct Professor in the School of Classics, History and Religion of the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia. This article first appeared in GESHER, the journal of the Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria.