

The Mutual Contributions of Church History and Systematic Theology: The Holocaust and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Case Study

Keith Clements

Abstract: The issue of the relationship between Church History and Systematic Theology has become more pressing, not only in the context of the rise of the modern critical historical method, but above all because, to an unprecedented degree, church history is presenting challenges to Christian ethics that go right through to core tenets of Christian belief and therefore to systematics. Unique in this respect is the challenge presented by the Holocaust and the response of Christian theologians in the general context of anti-semitism that surrounded and promoted it. This article takes the German martyr theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a test case of the relationship between systematic theology and history, assessing both the strengths and weaknesses of his response to the Nazi persecution of the Jews, in the light of his highly ethical approach to the theological task..

INTRODUCTION: SYSTEMATICS AND CHURCH HISTORY IN PARTNERSHIP

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY has been defined as: “that form of specialism which seeks to give a rational and orderly account of the content of Christian belief, sometimes held to include (and certainly closely related to) Christian ethical beliefs”.¹ There are of course various ways of giving that account, for example: distinguishing the elements of Christian doctrine (as in Calvin’s *Institutes*); working out a consistent terminology (as in John Macquarrie’s *Principles of Christian Theology*); or relating doctrine to a specific philosophical system (as in the Thomist use of Aristotle). Sometimes “systematic theology” is used almost inter-

1. S. Sykes, “Systematic Theology”, in A. Richardson and J. Bowden (eds.), *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983) 560.

2. London: SCM Press, 1966.

changeably with “dogmatics”, that is, literally, the teaching of the church. But Karl Barth, for example, sharply distinguished his own dogmatics from “systematics”, arguing that dogmatics is structured not on any human system but on what is appropriate to its subject-matter, namely, God’s self-revelation in Christ, the Word of God, giving rise to the trinitarian format of creation, reconciliation and redemption. In this sense, nevertheless, dogmatics qualifies as one very precise form of systematics.

Church history, on my definition, is the study of the development of the life of the church, including its thought and teaching, in all its branches, in the context of the world of the time, and in relation to other religious and social movements. Church history in this sense will employ whatever tools of historical science can be of assistance in understanding this development.

Concerning the theological task, Friedrich Schleiermacher, often hailed as the pioneer of modern theology, wrote in 1810:

No one can be perfectly possessed of all the various branches of theological knowledge in their full extent; partly because every discipline in particular is susceptible of an infinite development in detail, and partly because the diversity of disciplines requires a variety of talents, which can hardly be possessed in an equal degree by any one individual.³

Schleiermacher’s *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology* not only formed the basis for organising the faculty of theology in the new University of Berlin but its basic threefold structure of theology as Philosophical, Historical and Practical has proved foundational for the Protestant world ever since. Perhaps this in itself is justification of the need for systematic theology and church history to talk together.

Interestingly, Schleiermacher did not place dogmatics in a major category of its own but subsumed it under the general division of Historical Theology, understanding it as the theology of the church in its *present* historical situation. Indeed, one can argue that by its very nature, the study of Christian doctrine (by whatever actual name we call it) must include history because historicity is inherent in the very substance of Christian doctrine: God’s history of salvation, the acts of God culminating in Jesus Christ the Word made historical human being and the founding of the church as a historical entity. Much of the Bible itself

3. See K. Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher. Pioneer of Modern Theology* (London: Collins, 1987) for extracts and commentary on Schleiermacher’s works.

is, of course, in the form of historical narrative; the early Christian creeds refer to what happened “under Pontius Pilate”.

In 1955 the Scottish theologian Ronald Gregor Smith gave in Melbourne a series of seminal lectures later published as *The New Man*.⁴ Central to Gregor Smith’s thesis was an emphasis on the historical nature of biblical and Christian faith: “the basic Christian material permits of no flight from history, but it draws us back again and again to the singularity, the particularity, in a word, the genuine historicity which is its dominant characteristic”.⁵ Faith is not a timeless abstraction but arises in history and bears fruit in a new history.

Doctrine, moreover, has its own history. There may be a “deposit” of the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) but it has been in a process of unwrapping, interpretation and argument ever since. The Vincentian Canon attributed to Vincent of Lerins (died pre-450) sets out the threefold test of catholicity: *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est* – “what has been believed everywhere, always and by all”. This is a statement that makes a historical claim which, its self-evident innocence notwithstanding, invites historical examination (not least in ecumenical studies). Systematics and dogmatics nearly always include much historical discussion, at least of previous doctrine.

To take, again, Barth as an example: as a test, I took off the shelves at random Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* Volume III/3 (The Doctrine of Creation), and it fell open on one of those long sections of small print, which in this case was a discussion of Jesuit and Lutheran treatments of the doctrine of providence back to the seventeenth century. This is typical of Barth, not to mention his crucially important survey of Protestant theology in the nineteenth century,⁶ which in places is as much a history of the church, and not only so but also of its political, social and cultural contexts (see for example his treatment of the themes of absolute monarchy, Frederick the Great, the state church and so on). His favourite bedtime reading was on the American Civil War. Indeed, not only did Barth have a lively historical sense but towards the end of life he confessed in a letter to a German academic: “You must excuse me for having devoted my time and energy in the past decades almost exclusively to my main task as a dogmatician, though not without asking at times whether I would not in a second life dedicate myself fully to history, for which I have such an uncanny liking.”⁷ Nor did

4. R. Gregor Smith, *The New Man: Christianity and Man’s Coming of Age* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

5. Gregor Smith, *The New Man*, 32.

6. *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*. Eleven chapters are translated as *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: SCM Press 1959).

7. K. Barth, *Letters 1961-1968* (London: SCM Press, 1981) 52.

Barth ever forget, but frequently referred to, the lessons of the history that he himself had been involved in through the German Church Struggle in the 1930s.

So far this is a familiar theme: church history as the servant of, and a resource for, systematic theology. But, conversely, can systematics or dogmatics serve church history? Again, at one level it is obviously so. The historian wanting to know, for example, the precise significance of the Treaty of Westphalia would do well to consult Lutheran and Reformed dogmaticians on their respective conceptions of the relations between church and state relations, their interpretations of Romans 13:1-7 etc. in order to avoid simplistic judgments on *cuius regio, eius religio*.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE: SOME PROBLEMS

In our time, however, the relationship between church history and systematics has in certain respects become very fraught, in that church history is raising serious questions for systematic theology. Or, some would say, in the light of church history, systematics and dogmatics as such are becoming somewhat questionable disciplines. This is so in two senses, the first of which can be mentioned briefly while the second will occupy the rest of this study:

- i. Modern critical historical method acts as a solvent upon the doctrinal tradition (as it does of scripture) and any assumptions about its fixed nature or abiding validity. For example, if the triumph of Athanasian Christology at the Council of Nicea (325) was due as much to coercion by the emperor as to rational consideration by the bishops, what intrinsic authority rests with the "orthodox" position over against the "heretical" Arianism?
- ii. The most sensitive common areas between church history and systematics are found in the *ethical* territory. In our time church history to an unprecedented degree is presenting challenging questions to the ethical stature of Christianity, challenges moreover that go right through ethics to some core tenets of Christian belief and therefore to systematics. These challenges arise out of the actual record of Christianity as it faced the darkest episodes of the 20th century and address the tradition of Christian life and thought which, it is alleged, contributed to that darkness.

Within this second sense I refer particularly of course to the Jewish Holocaust under Nazism and the response of Christianity to it (though other episodes could be mentioned). I wish to explore something of what this means for both church history and systematics, and their relation to each other, and to focus on the treatment – both historical and theological – of one person who has become a key figure for Christians in this darkness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I hope that what will emerge is an appreciation of the need both for greater exactitude in historical assessments and for deeper reflection on some core theology – and of how these processes can assist each other.

POST-HOLOCAUST SYSTEMATICS AND CHURCH HISTORY: BAD NEWS FOR EACH OTHER?

It is tempting to retitle this presentation: “Since the Holocaust, does church history spell the end for systematic theology?” Or perhaps, “Since the Holocaust, does systematic theology explain why the history of the church is so awful?”

For something like 30 years now, there has been a huge discussion and an explosion of literature not just about the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews, and indeed the actual extermination of two-thirds (6 million) of the Jews of Europe, but also about Christian complicity in this the most colossal genocide in history. The most recent bibliography on the religious impact of the Holocaust⁸ lists some 1,500 articles and essays by both Jewish and Christian writers. “Theology after Auschwitz”, often with a question mark, has become a motif of our time. Of course there are many questions from a religious point of view posed for both Jews and Christians – not least that of theodicy. Does providence mean anything now?

But, for Christians, the most immediate challenge is the ethical. The Holocaust happened in Europe. If we do not like to speak of “Christian Europe” then we must at any rate speak of the Europe that for the best part of 20 centuries had been the chief homeland of Christianity, and where life and traditions were decisively shaped by Christianity. And the Holocaust happened, albeit at the hands of the Nazis, at a time when the churches were still alive, relatively strong and with the possibility of a powerful voice. Some commentators go so far as to describe the Holocaust itself as a Christian operation, in that many of the people who actually carried it out (Adolf Hitler included) were baptized Christians. To this of course it can be responded that the leading Nazi perpetrators

8. Jack R. Fischel and Susan M. Ortman (eds.), *The Holocaust and Its Religious Impact* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2004).

were “Christians” in only the most attenuated sense, disavowed any connection with the existing churches and personally had the utmost contempt for Christian teaching. Against the background of European *Volkskirchen* (people’s or national churches) many of us would wish the distinction to be recognised between “actual” and “nominal” Christians.

But the charge goes further. Even the “actual” Christians and churches, certainly in Germany, were largely passive and silent in face of this crime against humanity taking place in their midst. The trains transporting Jews in cattle trucks to Auschwitz wound their way across Europe from north, south, east and west, passing within sight and sound of the churches with their towers dominating the fields and villages, but the bells and the pulpits remained silent. Yes, there were exceptions: there were individuals and organisations who helped Jews to hide or escape, and the churches in Nazi-occupied Denmark and Norway for example made bold public protests. But over the record as a whole a dark cloud hangs, especially where church leaders are concerned. On the Roman Catholic side, the record of Pope Pius XII has been under grave scrutiny: did he hold back criticism for fear of Nazi assault on the church? He had, after all, as Cardinal Secretary of State been a chief architect of the Vatican’s Concordat with the Nazi regime in 1933.⁹ Among German Protestantism anti-Semitism had long been endemic. Protestant support for Hitler’s rise to power had been strongly intensified by the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christian) movement with their belief in the God-given sacredness of race and nationhood, and justified by leading sophisticated theologians like Paul Althaus and Emmanuel Hirsch. Such figures cannot be accused of favouring the eventual Holocaust, but they helped to stoke the anti-Semitism that it relied upon. The Confessing Church, the Protestant community that resisted the nazification of the church, stoutly rejected the imposition of the “Aryan paragraph” that would have barred pastors of Jewish descent from holding office but made no protest about the persecution of the Jews at large. Neither the famous Barmen Declaration on which the Confessing Church was founded in 1934, nor the post-war Stuttgart Declaration by its surviving leaders in October 1945, specifically mentioned the Jews and their fate.

The shame of this general picture is something Christians are having to learn to live with as part of their history. It is a very specific acquisition of recent decades, as I can illustrate personally. In 1964, just as I was starting my theological studies, I visited the Anne Frank House

9. For a definitive overall account of the response of the German churches to Nazism, see K. Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1987) and Vol. 2 (London: SCM Press, 1988).

in Amsterdam. I remember thinking how being in that house where there had been so much faith, courage and beautiful humanity eventually snatched away to the death camps, was like a confirmation of my calling to be a Christian theologian. This is what Nazism had done. This was the antithesis to Christianity. Thank God for Christianity! Forty years later, in 2004, I visited Auschwitz. I now took the burden of what I and my generation had been learning of the less innocent picture of Christianity's role. It is not just shock and horror that the Christian takes to Auschwitz, but repentance too. Christianity played a part in this, by default if not design. This *is* our church history for our time. As Timothy Gorringer says: "[W]hilst there are still those for whom arguments against the existence of God centre on 'science', today the most cogent arguments are precisely those which inspired the hostility of Voltaire: the history of the Church. We cannot play Pangloss in respect of these facts."¹⁰

This is serious enough. But there is a further charge: the shame of the church in the face of Hitler and the extermination of Jews was not just a modern "lapse" but the culmination of a twenty-century-long history of Christian anti-semitism that has remained endemic in "modern" Europe.¹¹ There are Luther's infamous inflammatory injunctions to harry and expel the Jews. There were the Spanish persecutions, the medieval pogroms and expulsions. There is the tradition right back to the patristic period, of seeing the church as the successor to God's rejected child or bride Israel: rejected for the most ultimately serious crime of *deicide* and therefore irretrievably guilty. Even such an exalted doctor of the church and moral reformer as John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), Patriarch of Constantinople, argued that Jews will be crucified throughout history because they had crucified Christ:

It is because you killed Christ. It is because you stretched out your hand against the Lord. It is because you shed the precious blood, that there is now no restoration, no mercy anymore, and no defence.... This is why you are being punished worse now than in the past.¹²

Again, it is tempting to say that this represents a lapse, albeit a rather long running one, of Christians and churches failing to live up to their true precepts and ideals. But the charge is in fact graver: that Christians

10. T. Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity. A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 20.

11. See for example: R. L. Rubenstein and J. K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz. The Legacy of the Holocaust* (London: SCM Press, 1987); Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Crucified Jew: Twenty Centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism* (London: Fount, 1993); C. A. Evans and D. A. Hagner, *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

12. Cited in Cohn-Sherbok, *Crucified Jew*, 33.

and churches *were* living up to their ideals, and it is those basic precepts and doctrines themselves that are the source of the trouble; that the virus of anti-Semitism is not an infection from outside the Christian body, but arises directly from the core doctrines of the faith.¹³ Above all, the charge runs, Christology itself is the root cause. On this view, the doctrine that Jesus is the divine Son of God, the very incarnation of God, at least implicitly carries with it the rejection of Judaism by making an exclusive claim for the status of Jesus and thus an absolute distinction between him as truth and Judaism as untruth. Nicea and Chalcedon never mention Judaism, but are implicitly and profoundly anti-Jewish in elevating Jesus to divinity and implicitly demonizing the Judaism from which he came. Anti-Semitism is therefore spoken of as the “dark side of Christology”.¹⁴ Not only so: anti-Semitism is deeply imbued in the New Testament itself, especially in the Fourth Gospel where the basic paradigm is of Jesus versus “the Jews”.

In reaction to all this some Jewish and even Christian minds take the line, in the light of Auschwitz and what led to it, that traditional Christianity is totally discredited. Christians can no longer make absolutist claims for Jesus and therewith everything in their tradition about the God-man, even his crucifixion and resurrection. All that can be left of Jesus is a Jewish wisdom teacher. Indeed, the “Jesus Seminar” in the USA has described the New Testament as the most dangerous anti-Semitic tract in history. At times, there seems like a call for Christians to renounce all claims to distinction either in themselves or in Jesus.¹⁵

There have of course been other sorts of reactions on the Christian side, and not wholly defensive or evasive either, in an attempt to face the horror of Holocaust theologically. Probably the most well known is Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God*.¹⁶ But he too has been under attack, being seen by some as promoting a Christian attempt to colonise Auschwitz theologically for Christian benefit. There has been a resultant danger of sheer paralysis of Christian theology under the dual threat of being damned if it tries, and damned if it doesn't try, to respond with new approaches to an understanding of God, human freedom, Christ, suffering, and the Jewish people.

13. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and David Tracy (eds.), *The Holocaust as Interruption* (*Concilium* 175 [5/1984]).

14. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide. The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974).

15. For this discussion see e.g. James F. Moore, *Toward a Dialogical Community. A Post-Shoah Christian Theology* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2004).

16. London: SCM Press, 1974.

One can imagine, at this point, the systematic theologians looking somewhat helplessly at the church historians and appealing for them to come up with some redeeming features of the story. Equally, the church historians may be imploring the systematics people to discover another version of traditional Christology, one which shows how an anti-semitic reading of traditional Christology is totally mistaken. It is unlikely that either side can so easily come to the other's rescue with such grand aims in mind. What might be possible, however, is something rather more modest but more hopeful for the future. With that in mind, let us take as a case-study the individual figure who sooner or later unfailingly comes into view when the Christian response to Nazism is under discussion: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45).

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: HERO OR VILLAIN?

Aided by his own writings, and the immense amount of published literature about his life and thought, not to mention a number of dramatisations of his story on stage and screen, more than sixty years after his death there is what might be termed a generalised positive image of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Christian world.¹⁷ In this he is the courageous and stalwart opponent of Nazism, to the point of martyrdom through his involvement in the plot against Hitler. His statue now stands with those of nine other twentieth century martyrs above the west door of Westminster Abbey. He made major contributions to theology, in his early philosophical-theological works (*Sanctorum Communio*, *Act and Being*, his biblical and theological expositions (especially *Creation and Fall* and *Christology*), his more homiletical and pastoral works written in the heat of the Church Struggle (*Discipleship* and *Life Together*) and his profound though unfinished *Ethics* written in the fraught conditions of the wartime, resistance. Finally there are his prison writings: his radical questions and explorations into, "Who is Christ for us today?" – the "world come of age", "religionless Christianity" etc. His was a theology sealed by his martyrdom, and his martyrdom derives its fullest significance from his theology.

17. The definitive account of Bonhoeffer is Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A Biography* (Rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). New English editions of all Bonhoeffer's works and writings are now being published by Fortress Press, based on the 16 volumes of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*.

In relation to the overall accusation against Christianity outlined earlier, how then does it stand with Bonhoeffer and the Jews?¹⁸ The standard Christian answer would include at least the following points:

- i. Bonhoeffer made known from even before the advent of Hitler to power his absolute opposition to the Nazi creed of blood, race and soil. This became clear in his ecumenical peace work and his trenchant theological opposition to the nationalist concept of “orders of creation” which formed the basis of Nazi attempts to “cleanse” Germany of “non-Aryans”.¹⁹
- ii. At the time when German theologians like the New Testament scholar Gerhard Kittel were attempting to play down the Jewishness of Jesus and the religious significance of the whole Hebraic tradition, Bonhoeffer in 1932-33 deliberately looked to the Old Testament in his lectures on creation, fall, temptation etc. In fact he had a lifelong love of the Old Testament, especially the Psalter which he described as *The Prayer Book of the Bible*.²⁰ In prison he avidly re-read the Old Testament and confessed to thinking more on Old Testament lines with every passing day.²¹
- iii. Bonhoeffer was a stalwart, some even said fanatical, protagonist of the Confessing Church in its rejection of any imposition of the “Aryan Clause” in church. A church that excluded people from its membership or ministry on account of their racial origin could not be the church of Jesus Christ.
- iv. Early in the Nazi period, April 1933, Bonhoeffer wrote and had published his paper: “The Church and the Jewish Question”.²² It was a unique statement for a German Lutheran. He sees the situation of the Jews as an urgent issue for the church and commends three possible positive approaches to it. (1) The church can question the state on whether its actions are promoting law. (2) The church can care for the victims, binding up those caught under the wheel whether or not they belong to the church. (3) The

18. See Ruth Zerner, “Church, State and the ‘Jewish Question’”, in J. de Gruchy (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 190-205.

19. See K. Clements, “Ecumenical Witness for Peace”, in de Gruchy, *Cambridge Companion to Bonhoeffer*, 154-72.

20. Now published in English together with *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

21. D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1971) 156-57.

22. Published in E. Robertson (ed.), D. Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Lectures and Notes 1935-39* (London: Collins, 1965) 217-25.

church can put a “spoke in the wheel” itself, a clear indication of the possibility of political resistance on behalf of persecuted Jews.

- v. Bonhoeffer stood by “non-Aryan pastors” in the Confessing Church and helped a number to leave Nazi Germany to find refuge in Britain and elsewhere, and while in London during 1933-35 he helped many Jewish refugees. His own twin sister was married to a “non-Aryan” Christian, Gerhard Leibholz and so he knew at first hand the predicament. of such people. The Leibholzes’ position at Göttingen, where Gerhard was a professor in law, became unendurable by autumn 1938 and Bonhoeffer assisted them to escape to England.²³
- vi. Immediately after the infamous *Kristallnacht*, when Jewish premises throughout Germany were vandalised and many synagogues were torched, Bonhoeffer in his Bible wrote the date 1938 “9.11.38” against the verse Psalm 74:8b: “they burned all the meeting places of God in the land” and underlined the next verse: “We do not see our emblems; there is no longer any prophet, and there is no one among us who knows how long.”²⁴ This is a clear expression of solidarity with the persecuted.
- vii. Bonhoeffer took the definite decision in late summer 1940 to enter the political conspiracy against Hitler as an active as distinct from just a knowing supporter (as he had been hitherto). The prime motivation for this step was, as well as to avoid military conscription by officially serving in the *Abwehr* (Military Counter Intelligence), to stop Hitler’s crimes – of which the onslaught on the Jews was the worst. Bonhoeffer was informed fully on the Nazi misdeeds by his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, a senior official in the Ministry of Justice who was the chief liaison between the military and civilian wings of the main resistance effort, and who personally invited Bonhoeffer into active involvement.
- viii. One of the specific projects to which Bonhoeffer was assigned by von Dohnanyi was “Operation 7”, in the wake of the first eastward transports of Jews from Berlin in late 1941. This involved getting a number of Jews, ostensibly recruited as *Abwehr* agents,

23. See K. Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006).

24. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 607.

into the safety of neutral Switzerland where Bonhoeffer's ecumenical contacts were able to assist in their reception.

- ix. In his wartime *Ethics* Bonhoeffer writes strikingly:

The historical Jesus Christ is the continuity of our [European] history. But Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Israelite-Jewish people, and for that reason the line of our forefathers goes back beyond the appearance of Jesus Christ to the people of Israel. Western history is, by God's will, indissolubly linked with the people of Israel, not only genetically but also in genuine un-interrupted encounter. The Jew keeps open the question of Christ. He is the sign of the free mercy-choice and of the repudiating wrath of God. "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Rom 11.22). *An expulsion of the Jews from the west must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew.* [Emphases mine]²⁵

- x. Also in *Ethics* comes a confession of guilt that Bonhoeffer intended for use by the churches in the event of an overthrow of the regime. It is based paragraph by paragraph on the commands of the Decalogue. That corresponding to "You shall not kill" states:

The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ.²⁶

What clearer reference could there be to what was happening in the "final solution"?

In view of all this, Bonhoeffer would seem guaranteed to exemplify the truly Christian stance of opposition to the Holocaust, a shining counter-sign to the otherwise dark scene of Christian failure. It is not, however, as simple as that. Once Bonhoeffer is taken out of his admiring Christian circle and exposed to wider view some critical observations and questions must be faced.²⁷ It is perhaps a parable of his ambiguity

25. D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1955) 70.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

27. For a critically detached survey of views on Bonhoeffer, see Stephen Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon. Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

in some eyes that while one of the most oft-quoted aphorisms attributed to Bonhoeffer is “Only those who cry out for the Jews may sing Gregorian!”, there is no sure evidence as to when, where, or even *if* he actually said this, as even his closest friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge admits. Be that as it may, while we might expect Bonhoeffer to provide a Christian ticket to enable dialogue with Jews in the post-Holocaust situation, many have been surprised when the Jewish response to Bonhoeffer is somewhat guarded. Yes, there are those who admire him greatly – but among those some will ask, “Why were there so *few* Bonhoeffers in Nazi Germany?” That points to the danger of a Christian misuse of him: his response, unusual for a Protestant pastor of the time, should not be used as a cover to divert attention from the silence and passivity of the majority. But more seriously, in some Jewish eyes – and in those of some Christians deeply involved in Holocaust and post-Holocaust issues – Bonhoeffer is not the saint or hero taken for granted by many, but a very ambiguous figure, indeed according to some to be viewed decidedly negatively. The most poignant sign of contemporary Jewish reserve towards Bonhoeffer is that at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, Bonhoeffer’s name is still absent from the garden dedicated to “Righteous Gentiles” who courageously risked themselves to save Jews. The case against Bonhoeffer runs thus:²⁸

- i. Whatever theological views Bonhoeffer took against Nazism, up until the early years of the regime at any rate he typically and took the traditional Lutheran attitude to the Jews. That 1933 essay on “The Church and the Jewish Question” (see note 22 above) in fact spends a lot of time cautiously explaining that the church should not be seen as interfering with the state except as a very last resort. But far more serious are the implications when he states: “Now the measures of the state towards Judaism in addition stand in a quite specific context for the church. The church of Christ has never lost sight of the fact that the ‘chosen people’, who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long period of suffering.” He quotes Luther, albeit not the reformer at his most inflammatory. The church looks to the Jews’ final homecoming – their conversion. They are a rejected people, but the church is itself unfaithful. This section of the paper, for all its oft-quoted remarks about the possibility of

28. What follows is based on a summary of views cited and discussed at a session of the Bonhoeffer section of the American Academy of Religion, 19-22 November 2005, in Philadelphia, with presentations by John de Gruchy, Victoria Barnett and Stephen Haynes. The relationship of Bonhoeffer to Jews and Judaism has been a matter of intense and repeated discussion within the International Bonhoeffer Society since 1980.

putting a “spoke in the wheel” of the unjust state, is to say the least embarrassing for the profile of Bonhoeffer. Chrysostom still speaks through him.

- ii. At about the same time as that paper, in the spring of 1933, Bonhoeffer submitted to the advice of his church superintendent not to officiate at the funeral of the father of his brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz, who had died an unbaptized Jew. While he came to regret deeply this decision, the episode shows just how equivocal he was to Jews outside the Christian community.
- iii. In fact Bonhoeffer’s “concern for Jews” throughout the 1930s was virtually confined to “non-Aryan Christians” especially pastors in the Confessing Church. He seems not have had any contact with the Jewish community at large, nor personal acquaintance with any Jewish intellectuals, nor to have sought any such contact.
- iv. Bonhoeffer’s references to Jews in his writings manifest an inability or unwillingness to see Jews and Judaism as existing in their own right. While he indeed values the Old Testament he does so only through Christian eyes, with a christocentric reading of the Genesis creation stories, the psalms etc. He displays an assumed Christian right to co-opt the Hebrew scriptures for Christian purposes and shows no interest in what the texts say for themselves or how Jews read them.
- v. Likewise, on the question of the Jews in Europe, his exposition in *Ethics* (see note 25 above) views them only in relation to Christ. Only the Jewishness of Jesus is of interest to him. That the Jew “keeps open the question of Christ” in Europe means that he has no interest in Jews or their rights for their own sakes.
- vi. The actual motives for Bonhoeffer’s entry into the conspiracy and his involvement in the *Abwehr* were to say the least ambiguous – as were in any case the intentions of the conspiracy as a whole. The political conspiracy around Admiral Canaris was not primarily about stopping the Holocaust, but about removing Hitler from power and then negotiating a peace so as to save Germany from utter ruin. “Operation 7” may have been genuine but it saved only a handful of Jews. The resistance to which Bonhoeffer belonged – and in a very minor way as a courier to possible allies abroad – was not about saving Jews but saving Germany.

- vii. In that “confession of guilt” in *Ethics* there is still no specific mention of the Jews. In any case, the references to violence, to murder of the innocents and the silence of the church occupy only a few lines. Far more space is taken up with matters such as loss of parental discipline and family life, breakdown in sexual relations and so on.

In summary the charges against Bonhoeffer are: that at most only very cautiously did he move out of the traditional Christian negative attitude to Jews; that he restricted his concern to Christians of Jewish descent; that while he was an opponent of Hitler, both in the Confessing Church and in political conspiracy, the latter involvement was mainly to save Germany from complete destruction, not save Jews from mass murder. (Some extreme critics of Bonhoeffer have even said that since Bonhoeffer believed in the final conversion of Jews there was no real moral difference between him and Hitler since both wanted to remove Jews from earth, only by different methods.) Doubtless Bonhoeffer shares in the root theological fault of Christendom, that the traditional belief in the divinity of Jesus at its worst makes the crucifixion into deicide, and at best makes an absolute distinction between Jesus and the church on the one hand, and Jews (with the rest of humanity) on the other. This resulted in moral paralysis as far as the plight of Jews at large was concerned, and in the final analysis Bonhoeffer appears to share in it.

Here, we might seem to be back yet again in our own situation of paralysis, with the church historians and systematic theologians looking helplessly at each other.

BONHOEFFER IN HISTORICAL CLOSE-UP

The closer historical examination of Bonhoeffer’s case must take account of the following observations:

- i. Certainly we must not to seek to defend Bonhoeffer by pseudo-historical generalisations, or whitewashing with hagiographical rhetoric. Rather, there is need to look in still more detail at the historical and biographical record with their interweaving of facts and value-judgements. That may indeed result in what to some people may appear to be a more “modest” Bonhoeffer – but a more “useful” one because closer to reality, and no less inspiring for that. No purpose is served by exaggeration. Bonhoeffer was not even a “leading” figure in the Confessing Church. The Finkenwalde seminary was a small-scale operation. So was his actual

role in the resistance as a double-agent in the *Abwehr*. The charges on which he was arrested in 1943 were relatively minor too (mainly to do with evading conscription). Not until after the failure of the bomb plot in July 1944 did his position become perilous. Few even in Germany knew of Bonhoeffer at end of the war, beyond his immediate circle of students.

- ii. Bonhoeffer's significance lies less in the scale of his activities than in the fact that, even as a "minor" figure, it was major step to take sides on such a huge divide. After 20 July 1944, even just to *know* there had been a plot was enough to get oneself hanged. The question was not "how much" one was to do but *whether* one was going to risk any concrete involvement at all. He acted from what and where he was, with his family connections and ecumenical contacts. Such as Bonhoeffer did act, when the majority did nothing at all.
- iii. The motives for Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy may have been mixed, but they were a mixture of undoubtedly *good* intentions. One major ingredient was certainly his wish to have a pretext, as an *Abwehr* agent, to avoid conscription. This, by itself, does not prove his anti-Holocaust credentials. But does that make this wish – not to serve in Hitler's uniform – any less honourable?
- iv. Operation 7 may have been relatively small-scale. But it was undoubtedly intended to save Jews, following the first transports of Jews from Berlin in late 1941.
- v. The paucity of explicit references to the suffering of Jews notwithstanding, it is inconceivable that Bonhoeffer did not react with horror to what he knew was happening to Jews at large. His biblical annotations on *Kristallnacht* (see above) should make that clear. The evidence for this is that he was repelled by just about everything Hitler was doing, and it is simply impossible to imagine him averting his gaze from any aspect of his murderous policies. So when says in his 1944 prison poem "Night Voices in Tegel" *We saw the lie raise its head/ And we did not honour the truth./ We saw brethren in direst need,/ And feared only our own death* there is no reason to think he did not at least *include* in this the onslaught on the Jews.
- vi. Here, however, is where we come to the most sensitive point in the whole exercise: the specificity of the fate of the Jews in the totality of the horrorscope that was Nazism. It is difficult to speak

here without risk of grave accusations, for one does not wish to be heard uttering the evasive “Jews were not the only victims”, which means downplaying the unique significance of the Jewish holocaust in its scale and nature. Equally, it is important to say that the uniquely demonic status of Auschwitz is what we in the post-war generations are privileged (or burdened) to know in a way that not all people, even the most insightful and courageous, were able to know at that time. Again, this is not to be misunderstood as justifying the “I did not know what was going on” attitude. People did know what was happening to Jews. Bonhoeffer knew. But they knew that horrors were also happening to others – known later not to be on the scale that the Jews suffered but horrors none the less. Gypsies and homosexuals are now commonly cited. But in the early stages of the Second World War, especially, one category of people was literally foremost in the firing line: the Poles. Hitler invaded Poland at the start of September 1939. Led by the *Einstazgruppen* the murders of Jews started almost instantly. Most of the Holocaust was to take place on Polish soil, most notoriously at Auschwitz. But it must not be forgotten that there was also a genocide of Poles as Poles. Warsaw was pulverised from the air. Vast numbers of Poles were executed as partisans and their supporters in the countryside. Occupied Poland was incorporated into the Reich. There was a determined effort to eliminate all representatives of distinctively Polish leadership – military, political and intellectual. “Auschwitz A” – built before “Auschwitz B” (Birkenau) – was first an extermination camp for Poles. Poland was effectively to be wiped off the map and out of history.

- vii. It was what was happening in Poland, not just to Jews but to civilians at large, that was most apparent in 1939-40, i.e. the period when Bonhoeffer eventually decided to join in the *Abwehr*-based conspiracy. Bonhoeffer heard about what was happening to Polish villagers from at least one of his former students serving in the army there. This is not to attempt a comparison with the enormity of the European Jewish Holocaust as a whole, but simply to identify what would have been centre-stage in the consciousness of someone like Bonhoeffer in the first twelve months of the war.
- viii. It can therefore be said that Bonhoeffer, whether or not he saw the fate of the Jews as a *unique* evil in scale and nature, would have seen what was happening to them within a framework of overall evil being committed by the Nazi regime, and it was this total

picture that morally justified his involvement in conspiracy. Does this lower his moral stature? Here one must speak – and request to be heard – very carefully. The Holocaust is *now* regarded (rightly) as having a unique status of evil. But does it thereby have sole rights in retrospectively determining a person's ethical standing? If we can find no evidence anywhere that Bonhoeffer explicitly says: "I regard the murder of the Jews as the greatest evil of our time and *therefore* I am willing to plot to remove Hitler, if necessary at cost of my life" – if one cannot find this said so explicitly does this reduce Bonhoeffer to a lower league table of morality? Arguably, by no means. In fact, it is the anxiously enthusiastic attempts to identify the Holocaust alone as providing his motivation that are in danger of downgrading Bonhoeffer, for they come close to saying that he was *not* moved by other or earlier known Nazi crimes against humanity, and this would hardly indicate a sensitive conscience or morally aware spirit. If it takes an actual Holocaust of six million people to stir one to resistance, that is hardly a good advertisement for one's ethics.

- ix. In all this, it is not being argued conclusively that Bonhoeffer did *not* regard the murder of the Jews as a unique evil and the prime motivation for his acts of resistance. It is quite possible that it was such to him, but we do not have conclusive evidence. The sure evidence we do have is that he regarded the Nazi regime as so criminally evil in its entire works, including its elimination of the Jews, that resistance and even tyrannicide were justified. There is then even no problem in admitting, for example, that when Bonhoeffer speaks in *Ethics* of the church being guilty of silence and acquiescence in face of "the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ (see above) he may not even have been speaking specifically of Jews. We may be quite sure he was *including* them in this description. The fact that in his time and place, given all else that was happening, he does not necessarily accord them unique or specific mention, indicates no weakness. Hitler was doing enough to horrify anyone of the slightest moral responsibility. And in any case Bonhoeffer had already shown in the *Ethics*, in his remark on an expulsion of Jews from Europe, what was his view.
- x. Furthermore, on the question of whether Bonhoeffer was more concerned to save Germany than to save the Jews, both the ethics and the practicalities of the conspiracy need to be examined very closely. Yes, it was Bonhoeffer who through Bishop Bell sought

mediation with the British government and the allies: would a non-Nazi German government be recognized by the allies as a negotiating partner? This, politically, was a *sine qua non* for the success of the resistance. An overthrow of Hitler required the cooperation of the German military high command, and that cooperation depended on their knowing that the outcome of an over-throw would be negotiation, not the drive to unconditional surrender. For some in the conspiracy, yes, this was probably sufficient motivation. There were indeed some, politically very conservative and even anti-Semitic in attitude, for whom this was the paramount aim. But for others, Bonhoeffer included, this was not the *entire goal* of the attempt on Hitler. For them, the objective was the removal of the Nazi state and all its terror apparatus and evil policies, so that Germany might be morally no less than politically cleansed and a new beginning be made with the family of nations. This was so for Bonhoeffer as he made clear in his secret meeting in Sweden at the end of May 1942, with Bishop George Bell. Bell later recalled their conversation: "*Deeply committed as he was to the plan for elimination, he was not altogether at ease about such a solution. 'There must be punishment by God', he said. 'We do not want to escape repentance.' The elimination itself, he urged, must be understood as an act of repentance. 'Oh, we have to be punished. Christians do not wish to escape repentance or chaos, if God wills to bring it on us. We must endure this judgement as Christians.'*"²⁹

In conclusion thus far: only by abstracting the Holocaust from its actual history, absolutising its evil in separation from all other evils of its time, and ignoring the concrete particularities of day-by-day engagement of Bonhoeffer in that history, can Bonhoeffer's essential moral integrity be called in question. Yes, he began as a traditional Lutheran vis-à-vis the Jewish question, and indeed remained confined both physically and mentally in his understanding of Jewish-Christian relationships. But the real issue is not where he began, but the direction in which he journeyed, and not the extent of his intellectual and cultural confinement but how, given that localisation and for all his human limitations, he concretely acted in it. We do not need to pretend that Bonhoeffer was better than he was, nor to turn him retroactively into the angel we feel that we require in order to improve the Christian record of that time. He was a person of his time and a product of his culture and history. Nevertheless he was able to transcend its limitations in civic courage and responsible action.

29. See Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain*, 118.

BONHOEFFER THE THEOLOGIAN: A CHRISTOLOGY OF SOLIDARITY

So much for the historical side, but what of the theological? It is time for the systematic theologians to come in. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in many respects a classically orthodox Lutheran theologian, whose most substantial lectures given in the University of Berlin 1932-33 were on Christology. Here he was addressing the whole tradition of doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ – incarnation, the Word made flesh, true God and true man, of one substance with the Father, of two natures in one person... This whole tradition, as described earlier, has been alleged as the root of so much evil in Christian-Jewish relations in which anti-semitism is the “dark side of Christology”. Indeed, traditional Christology allegedly separates Christianity from the rest of humanity as a whole. If this is the case, how does Bonhoeffer stand in this stream, and what role does Bonhoeffer’s treatment of Christology play in his ethics and actual engagement as a resister? Did it have an inhibiting role? Or help motivate it? Or did it have any connection at all? The following are key points in Bonhoeffer’s Christology:

- i. The *Christology* lectures, Berlin 1932-33.³⁰ Here Bonhoeffer prefers to speak not of “incarnation” as a general term, but of “the incarnate one”: not the what, or how of incarnation, but *who is the man Jesus, the Jew*. He is God incarnate, the Word made flesh, human. He is not man and “also” God, as if this divinity was added to his humanity. It is precisely in Jesus’ utmost humanness that God is present, incognito. He is the humiliated one. “*If Jesus Christ is to be described as God, we may not speak of this divine being, nor of his omnipotence, nor his omniscience; but we must speak of this weak man among sinners, of his manger and his cross. If we are to deal with the deity of Jesus, we must speak of his weakness. In Christology, one looks at the whole historical man Jesus and says of him, that he is God. One does not first look at a human nature and then beyond it to a divine nature, but one has to do with the one man Jesus Christ who is wholly God.*”³¹ In his emphasis on Jesus as the humiliated one Bonhoeffer is close to Luther’s theology of the cross. But Jesus Christ is also the exalted one, which means the glorification of humanity. Thus, for Bonhoeffer Jesus Christ is not some special person apart from and above humanity or confined to any one

30. D. Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (London: Collins, 1966).

31. Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 108.

section of it. In him there is seen the humility of the self-emptying of God in order to be in union with humankind.

- ii. Bonhoeffer's exposition of discipleship³² carries an emphasis throughout on the narrow way, the way of costly grace, of single-minded discipleship, of the "extraordinary" way of Jesus that his disciples are called to follow in a way that runs counter to the world. Attachment to Christ appears to mean separation from the world. Then in the final chapter, "The Image of Christ", it is seen that this Christ is in loving solidarity and identification with the whole of humanity. It is based on an Irenaean view of salvation, the restoration of the image of God in us. Thus to be in Christ means entering into his *philanthropia* for all humankind: "*Christ took upon himself this human form of ours. He became a human being even as we are human. In his humanity and his lowliness we recognize our own form. He has become like a human being, so that humans should be like him. And in the incarnation the whole human race recovers the dignity of the image of God. Henceforth, any attack even on the least of persons is an attack on Christ, who took the human form, and in his own Person restored the image of God in all that bears a human form.*"³³
- iii. Written during his involvement in the resistance, Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* in many ways reflects the situation of one fully immersed in civic responsibility yet in a necessarily hidden way, and facing all the moral complexities of plotting an overthrow. Central to his reflections is the need to overcoming "thinking in terms of two spheres", that typically Lutheran tendency to separate religious and secular, spiritual and political. In contrast, says Bonhoeffer, in Christ God and reality are united through the reconciliation of the world to God.³⁴ This is clearly an ethic not of separation but of solidarity with the world, and moreover one which recognizes that this solidarity may be called to step much further into areas far removed from what is frequently considered "virtuous": responsible action may include becoming guilty for the sake of others (a clear echo of the demands of the resistance, especially in its violent dimension), and in this way following Jesus: "[Jesus] is able to enter into the fellowship of the guilt of people and to take the burden of their guilt upon himself. Jesus does not desire to be regarded as the only perfect one at the expense of people.... From his selfless love,

32. Original German *Nachfolge*. English translation: D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

33. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 272.

34. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 168-178.

*from his freedom from sin, Jesus enters into the guilt of people and takes this guilt upon himself.... In this Jesus Christ, who is guilty without sin, lies the origin of every action of responsible deputyship.... Jesus took upon himself the guilt of all people, and for that reason every person who acts responsibly becomes guilty. If anyone tries to escape guilt in responsibility he detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence...he sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for people, and he is blind to the more irredeemable guilt which he incurs precisely in this."*³⁵

What is taking place in Bonhoeffer is a fusion of Christology and ethics. Bonhoeffer's Christ is one not of separation but of overcoming barriers. It is the condescension of God in the human Jesus, in loving solidarity with the whole human race that is operative here, not the denigration of one section, whether Jew or Gentile in the interests of another, or even of the Christian. It is a Christology that in turn motivates solidarity with others and especially the afflicted. Christology here is thus not an abstraction from the situation, or an exclusivism, nor is it paralytic of responsibility. In all cases, it is the reverse. It motivates engagement and solidarity and it nerves for action. Here Bonhoeffer has set a task for systematic theology, for a Christology that liberates, that celebrates God's reconciling oneness with all humankind. It is, further, a Christology that clarifies and accounts for Bonhoeffer's engagement in the resistance. Bonhoeffer retrieves the classical tradition and shows how, without distortion, it can be read and used in a way very different from its allegedly exclusivist, anti-Semitic and otherwise oppressive tendencies. The theology and the detailed history illuminate each other, and there emerges an impressive correlation between the kind of actions undertaken and the theological understanding that integrated them with faith, placing the human subject in a proper and just perspective and unfolding the theology into new possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Bonhoeffer has been taken as a case-study, within the wider framework of the church and the Jews under Nazism, on how church history and systematics need to inform each other. Without detailed and specific historical work theology and theologians tend to become decontextualised and prone to unnecessary denigration or to exaggerated status. Without an understanding of theology and, moreover, how a theology or doctrine actually *functioned* in a given life or context,

35. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 209.

history itself is in danger of missing out on an appreciation of crucial factors playing a part in the drama. In a case such as Bonhoeffer's, the historical and the theological integrate in a notable way, but there is no reason why the approach adopted in this study should not be applied to a range of other figures, episodes and themes in the story of faith and life.