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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## The Politics of Theology: Deadly Christian Compromises in Bonhoeffer's Germany

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**ABSTRACT**

Generally, this essay employs the concept of 'stance' to try to understand the theological thoughts and activities of Bonhoeffer and the Christian community at large during the turbulent events which occurred in Nazi Germany. In particular, it attempts a brief exploratory sketch of how various socio-political contextual factors significantly shaped many of his central theological ideas and concepts. The essay suggests that Bonhoeffer's doctrine of ethics cannot be adequately understood apart from the socio-political context of Hitler's dictatorship and the actions of the Nazi National Socialist political regime within which it emerged and developed. His active role in the resistance movement to the point of losing his life and that of loved ones was Bonhoeffer's way of putting his Christian beliefs into concrete practice. Horrified by the blind loyalty and obedience of the bulk of Christians to Nazi state authority, Bonhoeffer responded by formulating a theology to respond to what he viewed as transgressions against God, human life, and society itself. The essay concludes by asserting that all of Bonhoeffer's discussions about 'ethics' regarding conscience, freedom, the Christian faith and church, responsibility, and even his central concept of 'responsible action' were formulated in direct response and challenge to Hitler's political regime.

**KEYWORDS**

Stance, Nazi Germany, Hitler, responsible action, Machiavelli, church, government, state, Confessing Church, German Protestant Church, Barmen Declaration, the Aryan Paragraph, Pastor's Emergency League, liberatio ratio, Berlin rally, socio-political context, divine mandates, regional autonomy. theology, duty, society, morals

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**1. Introduction: The Christian 'Stance'**

The Christian "stance" (Curran, 1999, p. 30), or way of looking at the world, is radically different from other ways of looking at the world, to be sure (Lovin, 2011). It can be understood as a way of approaching or orienting one's self to moral dilemmas that stems from a set of shared beliefs, in this case, shared beliefs among Christians. Among that set of shared beliefs is the belief in God and in the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ in the flesh in order to reshape human life on Earth and to provide direction for human history. The birth, life and teachings, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are, therefore, at the core of the Christian stance towards the world.

This interconnected set of shared Christian beliefs anchors Christians as they struggle through all the moral choices of their lives by providing a way of thinking about their role or place in the world and their evaluation of human thoughts, actions, and events in that world. Even though Christians from early on up to the present have never developed their beliefs and ways of thinking in total isolation from other completely different belief systems and ways of thinking, they have deeply understood that the Christian 'stance' towards the world is indeed distinctive.

This means that Christians collectively tend to refer to this shared belief system in order to frame the moral reasoning through which they engage the world in their attempts to understand and solve problems they encounter. In turn, this moral reasoning

implies setting goals and understanding both one's duties in relation to this shared belief system as well as the achievement of the highest virtues in human thought and behavior.

To be sure, the life activities and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are considered to be fairly consistent with the Christian faith system at its core, as described above. This essay will attempt to explore Bonhoeffer's Christian 'stance' towards the turbulent events occurring in Nazi Germany during the time he lived, wrote and published extensive theological writings and practiced his faith under extremely trying circumstances and conditions. In particular, we will try to understand how political factors may have influenced the formulation and development of theological concepts and ideas in Bonhoeffer's writings. Since this essay is subject to the limitations of exploratory research and exegesis, it must necessarily be a brief tentative analytical exercise.

Therefore, we will restrict the analysis to some of the central concepts and theological themes contained in Bonhoeffer's writings on Christian ethics rather than apply it broadly to the entire corpus of his grand theological work (Bonhoeffer, 2015, 2010, 1999, 1997, 1995, 1974). The main analytical task is to try to show how some key parts of Bonhoeffer's theological ideas were developed as a response to concrete human tactile experiences with the severe political turmoil taking place in Nazi Germany and the world at the time.

Arguably, the strong implication here is that if we remove the influence of this key political factor, then one of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century never comes to fruition in modern times, at least not in the same way and to the same degree. Presumably, a similar argument could be applied to the thoughts and writings of other highly significant modern literary and theological figures, such as C.S. Lewis **(1)**.

## **2. The Politics of 'Stance'**

When it comes to facing real-world events, different Christians will underscore and utilize different components of the shared belief system they share (Lovin, 2011, p. 64). Not every Christian experiences the same world events in the same way, given the vicissitudes and variations of individual biography, psychological makeup, ideological leanings, social background, ethnic identity, national and international affiliations, and the like, let alone events occurring much closer to home in their neighborhood, locality, city, or country.

The moral questions, troubles, dilemmas, or crises that Christians may face at any given time are significantly influenced or shaped by many different factors operating in the wider society quite beyond their control. They themselves may or may not have contributed to some degree to the emergence and development of the very moral troubles they may be facing. One way or another, the moral questions they may have about their relationship with the wider society form an integral part of how they apply their Christian faith in everyday living.

The crucial point to emphasize here is that Christians attempt to logically.

**1** It is well known that C.S. Lewis was not a Christian until after his terrible experiences fighting Germans in hand-to-hand combat in the trenches as a British soldier in W.W. I, along with his war-time buddy, the almost equally illustrious Catholic Christian writer J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien had lost both his parents in childhood and grew up in dire poverty in the sooty polluted factory city of Birmingham. That war had laid terrible waste to the length of a continent and signaled the end of innocence and the end of the Christian faith for an entire generation of young writers in Europe as well as in America and elsewhere, writers who had lost faith in the God talked about in the Christian Bible. But unlike those scholars, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien used the terrible pains and sufferings of that war experience to deepen their Christian spirituality rather than to abandon it, Lewis using it to convert from atheism to Christianity. Essentially, they converted those horrific experiences into an authentic Christian biblical vision of hope, grace, and consolation as professional colleagues in the English

Implementing the tenets and beliefs of their shared faith system using the Bible as the core evaluative reference point is not adopting a mindless robotic slavish 'stance' toward events, relationships, and behaviors occurring in the wider society. Rather, it is necessarily distanced emotionally and intellectually, objectively removed, if you will, in order to permit evaluation and assessment according to biblical principles and values fervently believed and clearly understood.

In other words, if the Christian stance is indeed authentically biblical, it must be, at the very least, an active evaluative 'stance' toward the society with which it is interacting. Otherwise, Christians cannot truly be the ambassadors of God on Earth, so to speak, and act in real life in such a way consistent with biblical tenets to positively evaluate, assess, and constructively critique and, if necessary, pressure to reform human behaviors within the larger society. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that, from a biblical Christian point of view, the relationship between political power and Christian 'stance' is potentially antagonistic if political power exhibits behaviors that are inconsistent with biblical tenets, particularly the ten commandments.

### 3. Historical Context to Bonhoeffer's Theology

Here we can immediately see the application of this point to the turbulent period in which Bonhoeffer lived, probably the most crucial contextual factor influencing the nature and character of Bonhoeffer's theological ideas. The horrific events occurring in Nazi Germany and the world at the time of his theological writings were surely not lived by Bonhoeffer as passive, non-worrisome experiences cum Christian pastor. Mindless robotic obedience to laws and blind loyalty to the dictates of state officials and their bureaucratic lackeys did not appear to be a central

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Department at Oxford University, along the way producing literary and film, works that changed the disastrous course of the Christian faith, theology, literature, and scholarship, and the faith of millions.

Jokingly referred to as 'The Inklings', a kind of private literary club, Lewis and Tolkien were not the only literary stars of great notoriety who met every week in Lewis's office and elsewhere at or around Oxford to discuss ongoing writing projects, ideas, the state of the world, and the Christian faith – all of them famous in their own respects such as Charles Williams and Owen Barfield. The point to emphasize here is that the 'Great War' experiences of these literary notables greatly impacted their writings about the Christian faith, once again demonstrating the monumental influence of politics upon culture and the development of theology itself, particularly the Christian faith (Carpenter, 2006; Garth, 2004; Loconte, 2017; Zaleski & Zaleski, 2016). Bonhoeffer would turn out to be no exception to this general rule.

Components of Bonhoeffer's Christian 'stance' nor his close, like-minded associates.

However, Bonhoeffer almost certainly perceived in vivid detail with great emotional revulsion and spiritual disillusionment the real-life 'stance' and practices of other self-professed Christian adherents at the time, both the leadership activities and the on-the-street behaviors of German Christians. The argument here is that what he saw and heard from fellow German Christians (not to mention non-Christians, too) affected him deeply enough to think, behave, write, and act decisively as he struggled to redress perceived moral problems.

Even though many influential leaders of German society and a great deal of the German citizenry, Christian and not, were expressing blind loyalty to state laws and dictates, Bonhoeffer's Christian 'stance' towards the Nazi political system was anything but robotic obedience and blind loyalty. He viewed the Nazi government as a whole as dominated by morally corrupt leaders motivated and guided by evil purposes, from the top leader Hitler down to the last lowly but loyal bureaucrat.

The German political system and attached bureaucratic and law enforcement appendages were progressively and forcefully applying ungodly rules and regulations upon the entire German society. Worst still, Bonhoeffer clearly perceived the passively approving behavior of most Christians who were failing to engage in forms of active resistance to counter this political evil, choosing instead to obey their morally corrupt leaders while prayerfully cloistering in churches.

So, then, what does Bonhoeffer do? Run to the church to pray as many fellow German Christians did at the time? No, not by a long shot. Instead, he engages in numerous concrete actions to counter what he perceives to be the evil activities of a morally corrupt political system. He joins with other like-minded German pastors to create a '**Confessing Church**' to resist control by the Nazi state and thus offer some kind of spiritual relief to like-minded Christian leaders and on-the-street German Christians also looking for support and spiritual refuge, *despite the long history of Lutheran obedience to government*. Shortly we shall have more to say about the centrality of this last point as it relates to the history of Protestant Christianity in Germany.

Quite to the contrary of Protestant Christian tradition, and rather than robotically obey the governing authorities, Bonhoeffer, from the beginning, steadfastly worked in concrete human actions to undermine and destroy Hitler's political system. Again, the point to focus on here for our theological purposes is the specific nature of the relationship between Bonhoeffer's Christian 'stance' AND the German political system or the state, the relationship between 'stance' and society, if you will. An integral component of that stance consisted of active disobedience and resistance in terms of concrete actions in his life, unlike many doubtful, fearful, or loyal fellow German Christians. What's more, Bonhoeffer's active Christian stance of disobedience and resistance was consistent from the beginning to the end of his life.

The direct link here to various elements of his theology should not go unnoticed. When we stop to think about how difficult it must have been for Christians like Bonhoeffer to live virtuously and responsibly consistent with their religious principles and beliefs, then we begin to understand the importance of the Christian 'stance'. Bonhoeffer found himself mired in the muck of a legal and political system that was spreading perceived evils instead of operating to restrain them. Good Christians, let alone good people who were not Christians, found it increasingly impossible to do anything to counter any of the evils without breaking one or other German laws or violating the oaths that they had been forced to publicly admit and sign.

Everyone was too scared or too blinded by loyalty to the German state or too legally restricted, and this prevented engagement in meaningful disobedience or resistance. So, Bonhoeffer concluded that what was needed to stop Hitler's evil political activities were NOT Christian people who were willing simply to do their German duty and thereby absolve themselves of any moral responsibility. Instead, he reasoned theologically, what was needed were Christians willing to act consistently with their self-professed Christian beliefs and risk guilt by "stepping outside of a failed system of rules" (Lovin, 2011, p. 211).

People should not always be overly preoccupied with 'doing the right thing', especially when that 'right thing' may involve obeying laws that commit evils in the wider society. Christians do not have a 'duty' to commit evils, surely, by closing their eyes to the social effects of evil laws. So, Bonhoeffer's theological notion of 'duty' here means that the Christian duty is to God, not the state nor to society. When moral problems arise because evil rules have been formulated or promulgated or when rules have become outdated, or when they have been rewritten to serve narrow political-ideological interests, then Bonhoeffer claims Christians have to be willing to risk guilt to engage in responsible action, willing to risk being wrong and feeling guilty in order to achieve a higher good.

Bonhoeffer says this is a kind of "free venture, not justified by any law" associated with the political system because, in that case, you may be acting against that political system (Bonhoeffer, 2015, p. 284). Furthermore, when social action like this is required from Christians, it's always without knowing for sure ahead of time what all the moral risks will be. In these cases, the Christian undertakes actions taking full moral responsibility but without knowing with certainty what the precise results will be, many of which could be highly negative for the Christian agent and for others. These unknown results should not stop Christians from making a decision, taking decisive actions, accepting full responsibility for what comes, and taking the risk of feeling guilty.

Once the Christian makes the decision to disobey and counter evil, there's no looking back with regrets due to unforeseen or unaccepted results. For Bonhoeffer, that decisive action included involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate his political leader in a quest to end evil and end the war. We can easily see here the link between a specific element of Bonhoeffer's theology and the political evil he experienced in Germany at his time. That's what the 'Confessing Church' movement at the time was all about.

#### **4. The 'Confessing Church' Movement**

It's well worthwhile at this point to provide some added detail about this social movement within German Protestantism during the time of Nazi Germany since it is pivotal for a proper understanding of Bonhoeffer's theology. As intimated above, it emerged as an explicit public declaration of some Protestant Christian church leaders against the efforts of Nazi government-sponsored proponents to amalgamate ALL Protestant churches into one single monolithic and distinctively Nazi German evangelical church. The importance of this factor can be easily understood when we consider the distribution of Protestant Christians in Nazi Germany.

The number of Protestants in Germany at the time (roughly 1935) was approximately 45 million people, with a total population of about 65 million. Of these Protestants, about 150,000 belonged to so-called '**free churches**' or Christian denominations and independent churches that were separate from the government and, therefore, not a part of an established or state church. As such, these free churches did not in any way define nor help to define government policy, nor did they accept church theology or policy definitions from the German government. They also did not receive any benefits whatsoever from the German government, and that meant no government endorsements or funding at all. It should be clear here that the word "free" in the expression 'free church' meant 'free' from government control.

However, the largest regional Protestant Church, the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union (ECOPU), was the strongest Protestant church at the time, with a membership of 18 million. Just as an important sidebar to this historical detail of German Protestantism during the Hitler political regime, it should be mentioned that only about 2,500 of the 18,000 total Protestant pastors at the time (1935) either participated in and/or belonged to the free 'Confessing Church' movement in efforts to block Hitler's attempts to expand already-established control over the largest ECOPU.

Bonhoeffer was one of these 2,500 pastors who openly signed a document to establish and grow a '**Confessing Church**' to counter Hitler's control over and continued attempts to expand the ECOPU to incorporate all Christian churches eventually into one state-established and state-supported Nazi Christian church. But before we delve into greater detail about this 'Confessing Church' movement in which Bonhoeffer participated and fully supported, we need to understand how it connects or links up with the historical development of Protestant Christianity in Germany. In this way, the connection between various elements of Bonhoeffer's theology and socio-political context will be further demonstrated.

#### **5. Protestant Christianity in Germany**

Prior to and leading up to Hitler's dictatorship, the Protestant Church in Germany was divided into geographical regions and structured along denominational lines (Calvinist, Lutheran, and United churches) based on historical and political developments within the monarchies and republics of those different regions (2). The Protestant churches affiliated with their ruling political

dynasties and the ruling governments provided financial and institutional support for their own church, again underscoring the intimate connection between Protestant Christianity and obedience to the state in Germany.

Therefore, church and state were combined in Germany on a regional basis. After World War I, these many different regional churches had lost their secular political rulers, and serious government efforts were made to de-establish the regional Protestant churches from any government dependent connections. Of course, all Christian churches and denominations resisted government efforts to de-establish them and de-link them from state financial largess and affiliations of any kind.

A compromise was reached between the German government and the Protestant churches, which favored the latter in terms of retaining considerable financial support and releasing state control over the government structures of the Protestant churches. During the early period of the Weimar Republic circa 1922, the German Protestant Church founded the German Evangelical Church Confederation. This Confederation consisted of 28 regional or provincial churches with boundaries closely aligned with those of the federal states in which they were located.

The purpose of this kind of church organizational system was to allow for a great deal of regional autonomy in German Protestant governance. It did so by making possible a national church parliament which served as an effective forum for

**2** In fact, it still is to a considerable extent.

Discussion to help resolve theological and organizational disputes. In turn, unfortunately, it also made it easier later for Hitler to command the loyalty of Protestant Christians, something completely unforeseen by higher-ranking Protestant Church leaders until Hitler was well into his dictatorship and dominating religious policy-making in Germany.

Why is this brief but revealing history of Christianity in Germany important in terms of Bonhoeffer's theological ideas and writings? This is the "context" (social, political, religious, historical) within which Bonhoeffer engaged in theological writings and practiced Christian beliefs, at least attempting to apply a Protestant Christian 'stance' in a hostile cultural environment. Bonhoeffer well understood, the learned theologian that he was, that most Protestant-Christians had actually voted with their feet for the Nazis in the 1932 and 1933 German state elections and remained loyal even after Hitler's seizure of power in true Lutheran-obedience-to-the-state style. By contrast, Hitler gathered little significant support from most other religions in Germany. For example, German Catholic Christian support for Hitler was considerably below the national average (Spenkuch and Tillman, 2018).

Bonhoeffer knew very well that most of the Protestant churches had NOT flat out rejected the principle of National Socialism espoused by Hitler's political regime. As stated above, there had always been a long tradition of an intimate bond (financial and otherwise) between the German state and the Protestant Christian altar, as well as adherence to the principle of a strong central government authority over German society. Only a limited number of Protestants, significant though they were, opposed rapidly increasing Nazi dictatorship over more and more areas of German civilian life, including Christian church policies such as Karl Barth, Wilhelm Busch, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but they were largely lone wolves howling in an empty cultural forest.

These rare dissident Christian voices objected to Nazi political policies based on solidly Christian moral and theological principles. The way these Christian dissident voices interpreted the Christian 'stance' varied dramatically from the German cultural norm at the time. The Nazi state was claiming total control over the German person, and this attempt at total control could not be reconciled with what they perceived to be God's ultimate sovereignty over that German human being, a belief directly linked to Creation doctrine in the Christian Bible.

Bonhoeffer himself was very well aware of the historical links between the national government and the Protestant Christian movement in Germany, which developed in the late Weimar period (**3**). For the most part, these *initial German*

**3** Hitler actually assumed office officially as Chancellor on January 30, 1933.

*Protestant Christians were a group of fanatic Nazi Protestants hastily organized in 1931 to help win elections of presbyters and synodals in the old-Prussian church. This was a group of Protestant Christians whose religious and political motivations emerged in response to the social and political turmoil in Germany caused by World War I when a republican political regime succeeded the authoritarian regime of Wilhelm II, essentially the same political conditions that led to support for and election of Hitler as dictator.*

There were several other factors that encouraged the growth and development of Protestant Christianity at the time, also well understood by Bonhoeffer and his small dissident group of Protestant Christian leaders. Along with the effervescent revival of German folk traditions at the time, one noteworthy factor seldom discussed in the theological literature was the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary (in 1917) of Martin Luther's 95-Theses posted on the doors of the Wittenberg church in 1517.

This anniversary celebrated long afterwards seemed to *endorse German nationalism in principle*, to provide a religious worldview of the preferred place of Germany within the Protestant tradition itself, and to *legitimize the hatred of Jews*. In fact, it is less well-known that Martin Luther's own extreme and shocking antisemitism in several explicit written tracts and treatises had already been a consistent theme in Protestant Christian Germany for many centuries before Hitler's Jewish genocide.

Another key historical factor involved in the peculiar development of Protestant Christianity in Germany, which Bonhoeffer was surely aware of, was the relative neglect of the importance of the Old Testament in Protestant theology and the removal of parts within it that were determined or believed to be 'too Jewish'. At the same time that this occurred, the New Testament was replaced with another version called "The Message of God", a version cleansed or purged of all traces of Jewishness, if you will (Grigg, 2011; Heschel, 2008). More to the point, Bonhoeffer was well aware that German Protestant Christian theologians had worked tirelessly to remove the Jewishness from the New Testament and from the divine person of Jesus himself, only to be replaced by a cheap Aryan model.

Not to be de-emphasized in a degree of importance is the last key factor involved in the emergence and development of German Protestant Christianity, namely, the strong admiration and respect for secular government authority always emphasized by Luther himself employing questionable interpretations of scripture (Romans 13:1-7), although these were interpretations strongly disputed by Catholic theologians at the time, like Karl Barth.

### **6. Nazi Pressure for a New National Christian Church**

In any case, when the Nazis took power through national elections in 1933 with the support of 70%-80% of all German Christians, they agitated for the creation of a *new national church* to replace the federation of independent regional churches, which included the Lutheran, Reformed, and United religious traditions. In response to these Nazi political pressures, Protestant federation leaders agreed to write a new constitution for a new 'national' church which they called the *German Evangelical Church*.

They believed that such centralization was a long-time goal for many pro-Hitler German Christians who thought that centralization would greatly improve Church-state coordination and, therefore, cooptation into the Nazi policy process. Consequently, they pressured Hitler's high-ranking advisor on religious affairs to be elected as head bishop of the planned new Church. When the federation council met, however, they elected another candidate to be bishop of this new Church which, of course, infuriated Hitler.

In turn, Hitler summarily declared that election illegal and imposed his own advisor as head bishop. From that moment onwards, these pro-Nazi German Christians easily won all elections in all the governing structures of all the regional churches, EXCEPT four regional churches and one minor synod in the old-Prussian Church. Christian adherents of the so-called 'Confessing Church' referred to these German government-ruled churches as 'destroyed churches', while the four electoral exceptions to Nazi rule were called 'intact churches'.

The overwhelming majority of German Christians favored Nazi rule over church policies, and continued Nazi electoral successes in provincial and regional governing bodies of most Christian churches enabled Nazi policy to dominate national synods. It wasn't long after Hitler's religious advisor was summarily imposed as bishop leader of the new national church that it formally adopted the so-called "*Aryan Paragraph*" (4), which operated to defrock all clergy of any Jewish descent, even clergy who had married non-Aryans. Antisemitism was already shifting into high gear in the national German Christian church. The key point to keep in mind here in providing the historical links to Bonhoeffer's theological musings is just how serious the political situation had rapidly become by the time he was engaged in religion.

**4** The infamous 'Aryan paragraph', as it were, was a legal clause inserted within the statutes of organizations that reserved membership solely to members of the 'Aryan race', thereby excluding all rights from any non-Aryan groups, especially Jews and Slavs. It was a dominant aspect of public life in Germany and Austria from 1885 to 1945  
*Practice.*

Great political pressures stimulated novel theological ideas as great thinkers like Karl Barth and Bonhoeffer tried to make theological sense of what was happening WITHIN a Christian mindset. Clearly, Bonhoeffer was at pains to argue that there were severe weaknesses contained in the kind of Christianity that was showing itself in Germany at that time. How can it be that certified church-going 'Christians' were allowing all of this to happen and NOT taking action to resist or disobey? How can Germans call themselves 'Christian' and still allow and even promote the evils that Bonhoeffer saw? Among other things, one of the conclusions he came to was that what he was witnessing was NOT authentic Christianity.

## 7. The Aryan Paragraph

In any case, the Aryan Paragraph stimulated a great controversy among some of the Christian clergy who responded almost immediately to perceived growing threats upon the Christian church, although they represented a small minority of total Christian clergy in Germany at the time. Still, this small minority took action and formed the Pastors' Emergency League (PEL). Although the League started out as an organization to provide desperately needed assistance to Jewish clergy, it soon evolved into a forum for voicing dissent against Nazi interference in Christian church affairs. Despite louder and louder objections from the German Christians in the new national church, PEL membership grew considerably. At this point, enter Bonhoeffer's involvement with the so-called 'Confessing Church' movement.

The individual members of the PEL made several 'pledges' or public declarations in oral and written form, all duly signed and stamped as official League policy. Among these pledges was that all members agreed to fight against attempts by the Nazi government to determine their own policy doctrines. That is to say; they publicly contested any and all Nazi government infringement on the 'confessional freedom' of the Christian churches, all Christian churches. In practice, of course, this meant that they publicly opposed the defrocking of pastors of any Jewish descent, the so-called 'Aryan Paragraph', claiming that it has effectively changed the meaning of baptism in Christianity.

Instead, the PEL made a distinction between the categories 'Jews' and Christians of Jewish descent, arguing vehemently that converted Jews and their descendants were indeed fully Christian and, by logical extension, full members of the Christian church. It's important to notice that the PEL's primary objections were not based in principle on opposition to the persecution of Jews lacking Christian credentials. Eventually, though, this small group of pastors grew to more than 6,000 League members and would evolve into Bonhoeffer's 'Confessing Church' (Barnett, 1992).

Then a pivotal socio-political event occurred in German society that would impact tremendously on the development of the emerging 'Confessing Church'. In mid-November 1933, there was a grand rally of German Christians held at the Berlin sports arena packed to the rafters where the complete unity of national socialism and German Christianity was proclaimed, peppered with huge banners and swastikas everywhere, while speaker after speaker chanted the greatness of German unity to a loud chanting pro-Nazi Christian crowd greatly favoring the ideas these speakers were espousing. What ideas? These ideas:

1. Christian pastors unsympathetic to the German national socialist dream of church-state unity should be immediately removed from office.
2. Clergy members of Jewish descent should be expelled from the Church.
3. The Aryan Paragraph should be implemented in all churches immediately.
4. The Old Testament should be removed from the Bible.
5. Non-German features of ALL religious services should be removed.
6. The Aryanization of Jesus in the Bible who should be portrayed in pro-Aryan fashion as fighting against the corruption of Jewish influences.

(Barnett, *ibid.*, pp. 34-35)

If it had not been clearly understood before, then certainly after this rally, it was clear to many thoughtful Protestant Christian leaders that the Nazi government was not just interested in the political and governing affairs of Christian churches in Germany but, as well, determining central theological issues and policies within the Church itself partly through reformulating foundational documents such as the Old and New Testaments.

Shortly after the Berlin rally, Hitler's self-imposed bishop leader of the new evangelical church fired and transferred pastors adhering to Emergency League policies and pledges, including summarily deposing the bishop heads of two regional churches. Those two regional churches had steadfastly refused to merge their churches with the new national church, the German Evangelical Church. As this direct aggression continued by Hitler's imposed bishop leader of the national church, some thoughtful leaders were spurred to take further actions against Hitler's political regime.

In May 1934, this small rebellious group of opposition leaders met in Barmen **(5)** to publicly denounce the Nazi's new evangelical church and to publicly declare that their own congregations were the ONLY duly constituted authentic 'true' Evangelical Church of Germany. This official public denouncement and declaration were primarily authored by none other than the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth in consultation with other protesting pastors and some small individual congregations. Barth and this small group of protesting pastors publicly declared that the German Church was NOT in any way an apparatus of the German State and that state control over the Church was a false doctrine.

They stipulated explicitly that the limit to any state, let alone the totalitarian German state, was God's commandments. This public declaration soon came to be known as the *Barmen Declaration*, which, in turn, became the foundational document of the so-called 'Confessing Church'. The reason why it was called a "confessing" church should be immediately apparent because it was founded upon the public declaration or 'confession' of the Christian faith.

### **8. Two Opposing Protestant Christian Movements**

In effect, the Barmen Declaration signaled to all Germans the existence of two movements within the German Protestant Church, namely, the German Christian movement and the Confessing Church movement, which often also called itself the Evangelical Church of Germany just to remind Germans that it was the only 'true' church. But it's important to state here that the 'Confessing Church' was NOT rebelling against the general political and social objectives of the Nazi political regime but, rather, its ecclesiastical policy (Benz, 2006; Bergen, 1996). That is to say, it did not, for the most part, offer any political resistance with the expressed intent of undermining and destroying the Nazi political regime. It tried to protect its organizational structures from Nazi intrusion and maintain the integrity and independence of

5 Barmen, Germany, is a former industrial metropolis that had combined or merged with four other towns to form the major city of Wuppertal. Besides being one of the pioneering centers for the industrial revolution on the European mainland and for the socialist movement since Karl Marx's sidekick, Friedrich Engels, was born there, it was also the site of one of the first concentration camps. So then, the city of Barmen held a great deal of notoriety in the German culture at that time, not to mention Judeo-Christian communities around the world.

#### *Church doctrine.*

In terms of church doctrine, it tried to preserve the commandments in the Bible by not allowing them to be the handmaiden of Nazi ideology. It's important to point out that the Barmen Declaration itself did not mention nor protest against the Nazi persecution of Jews, nor did it protest against other Nazi totalitarian measures. It was simply an affirmative statement of ecclesiastical independence, very much in line with literally many centuries of Protestant doctrine. So, then, it was definitively NOT an overt statement of antagonistic rebellion against the Nazi regime's political and social policies and activities (Barnett, *ibid*, p. 55). So the persecution and murdering of Jews continued largely in the deafening silence of Protestant Christian churches (Gerlach, 2000; Goldhagen, 1996).

However, the Lutheran Protestant Christian faith of Germany was more and more combined with and infused by Nazi racial ideologies, antisemitism, German folk traditions, nationalism, and various paganistic heresies such as the notion of a heroic Aryan Jesus in the New Testament as well as the abrogation of the Old Testament and the purging of all Jewishness in both Testaments. These real political developments placed all members of the Confessing Church in progressive, principled opposition to both German Christians themselves and the German political machinery, the state.

As this principled opposition grew more and more intense, the leadership of the Confessing Church was forced to send Hitler himself a polite but firm memorandum in May 1936 protesting the Nazi regime's anti-Christian policies and tendencies, denouncing its vehement antisemitism, and demanding that the Nazi regime keeps its nose out of internal Protestant Church affairs. This memorandum is where Hitler's persecution of German Christians begins in earnest. Hundreds of dissenting pastors were immediately arrested. The manager and legal advisor of the Confessing Church got murdered shortly after being imprisoned in a concentration camp designed to kill Jews. All the funds of the Confessing Church were confiscated, and it was legally forbidden for it to collect any monies during any church activities whatsoever.

Shortly thereafter, the leader of the Confessing Church resigned when he learned that he could no longer visit Confessing Church pastors who had been imprisoned in concentration camps. On the day following this resignation, the Nazi regime's Minister of Church Affairs spoke to the remaining members of the Confessing Church in ways that revealed in shockingly repulsive terms the Nazi regime's hatred of Christianity. Basically, the Minister affirmed matter-of-factly that the national socialism of Hitler's political regime was doing God's will on earth. Supporting national socialism was to be viewed as 'positive Christianity', and Christianity properly conceived is represented by the Nazi Party. He said that Hitler, the Fuhrer, was now calling the German people to the only real Christianity and that this calling was the new revelation.

In the end, it would be a considerable stretch of the imagination to classify both the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church itself as a resistance movement per se, although this is not to say they were unconcerned about the cultural turmoil caused by the dictatorial Nazi political regime. In a concerted effort to bring the Christian Church's opposition to Nazism to its feet in active protests or to bring the German population through honest, rational, intellectual processes toward this realization, they tended to defer political opposition as a tactical move. They wanted fellow German Christians to come to their own conclusions about the contradictions between being a Christian and being a Nazi in practice.



In dealing with an evil political regime and its policies in this abstract, politically correct way, they sacrificed Christian integrity on the altar of Nazi culture. The only unified resistance engaged in by the Confessing Church was resistance to Nazi interference in the governing affairs of the Church. Yes, many leaders of the Confessing Church, like Bonhoeffer, tried to convince central Confessing Church leaders to adopt a much more radical opposing 'stance' to Hitler; unfortunately, it never adopted this policy position.

So, then, in the end, only a very few Protestant Christian leaders like Bonhoeffer were left to their own wiles to risk participation in hardcore actions to undermine and destroy the Nazi state. This is the true socio-political context within which Bonhoeffer engaged in Christian theological writing, a context without which it is unlikely he would have achieved theological fame to the same degree.

### **9. The Liberated Ratio (Reason)**

There were many other aspects or features of Bonhoeffer's theological thoughts which were well framed by the political turmoil occurring within Nazi Germany at the time, even simple ideas about the nature of reason and how it relates to Christian ethics. He began by arguing that there should be "intellectual honesty in all things", no hypocrisy, conceits, prejudices or sentimentality, but only a desire for truthfulness. However, that desire for intellectual honesty and rational clarity does not absolve human beings from "our inner duty to make honest and clean use of ratio" (Bonhoeffer, 2015, pp. 115-116).

In the real modern world, human beings have to determine what their duty is by themselves, independent of desires, wishes, and illusions, doing their own thinking for themselves rather than relying on blind obedience to state authority. This is what separates secular ethics from Christian ethics, where freedom to think for yourself is essential. The problem for Christian ethics is how to achieve this; Christian ethics has to be a self-disciplined ethics independent of state and society.

In essence, Bonhoeffer saw clearly that blind rational dependent obedience to state authority was bringing Germany to the edge of complete destruction and causing German Christians to engage actively in horrific social evils on a widespread basis. This is why he argued here that a truly liberated ratio would NOT blindly obey the dictates of state authority.

Most importantly, Bonhoeffer also argued that in order to achieve the liberation of reason from blind obedience to state authority, the Christian must exhibit the willingness to accept the moral risks involved in taking responsible action to address or redress wrongs in society. In fact, he argued that this kind of responsible action may require engagement in "free venture" activities "not justified by any law" (Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 284).

In other words, Christians may be called upon by Christian duty (duty to the integrity of the Christian faith system) to engage in morally questionable activities without fully knowing what the expected results are or the moral risks. Still, the authentic Christian must accept the duty and the full responsibility to act consistent with the command of God. Clearly, Bonhoeffer here is referring to his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and end the war. If this involvement is sinful in terms of the Christian faith system itself, Bonhoeffer NOT acting to resist, undermine, and destroy the evil Nazi political regime can be considered an even greater evil.

### **10. Machiavelli in Bonhoeffer**

Here again, Bonhoeffer is looking within the Christian belief system itself for ways to justify his involvement in the assassination plot against Hitler and attempts to destroy the German state machinery, something he finds extremely difficult. So, what does he do? He turns to the political theory of Machiavelli for answers (*ibid.*, p. 66, 162, 191). Like Machiavelli, he argues that occasionally in the course of history, obedience to "explicit law of a state, a corporation .... entails a clash with basic necessities of human life" (*ibid.*, p. 191). In such cases, Bonhoeffer argues (but Barth does not) that taking "responsible action" to redress the situation involves departing from governing laws, principles, norms, or ethics beyond any possibility of political control or regulation by law.

Machiavelli argued that these primordial facts of life or necessities of life could not be encapsulated or framed, or boxed in any law, however secular, and by inference, however divine. Neither secular political laws nor transcendental divine laws can capture these primordial necessities of life. Therefore, when they are severely violated, it is up to the fully free and morally responsible human agent, the one with the free responsibility to act, to do something about it. They no longer permit liberatio ratio or free human reason to devise alternative exit strategies out of the moral problem. "Ultima ratio" becomes the only solution to the moral problem at hand. It is the extraordinary "necessita" situation of reason at war for basic life necessities, as Machiavelli said. "Ultima ratio lies beyond the laws of reason; it is irrational action" (*ibid.*).

When the basic necessities of human life are threatened, they appeal only to "the freedom of those who act responsibly" (*ibid.*, p. 192). In these cases where the secular law and the divine law are by nature of basic human necessities broken, the secular law and

the commandment is broken "out of dire necessity", Bonhoeffer concludes (Ibid.). When the Christians engage in this kind of action, they are, in fact, "... surrendering ... one's own decision and action to the divine guidance of history" (Ibid.).

The claim here is that this is what Christians must be expected to do in such situations where the basic necessities of human life are directly threatened, and only God can bring judgment to the final results. Clearly, Bonhoeffer is once again transforming his own real-life predicament into theological reasoning. This is exactly the kind of socio-political situation Bonhoeffer felt he was imprisoned in Nazi Germany at that time.

### **11. Sacred Mandates Against Hitler**

There are other elements of Bonhoeffer's theological ideas that are intimately related to and were heavily influenced by the turbulent political climate within which he lived and wrote in Nazi Germany beyond those already mentioned above. He specifically formulated and used these Christian conceptual ideas when engaged in head-on theological arguments against Nazi supporters in the Protestant Christian Church (as Greene points out in the Editor's Introduction of Bonhoeffer's

Ethics book). For example, Bonhoeffer argues that God established relationships with humanity by divinely ordaining social orders or orders to "preserve life" (Ibid., p. 109) or "divine mandates" (Ibid., p. 298) or "divine commissions" (Ibid., p. 299).

These divinely ordained "orders" of human life bestowed by God consisted of "church, marriage and family, culture, and government" (Ibid., p. 297). These divine mandates are divine because they are grounded in the commandment of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. As such, they are established into the world from above as divine structures to organize and unify all human life, "organizing structures" that represent "the reality of Christ" and "God's love for the world and for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ" (Ibid., pp. 298-299). Therefore, they are not outgrowths of human history; they are not earthly powers; they are not expressions of the collective will; rather, they are divine creations and divinely authorized and subject only to divine command.

Earthly powers cannot do what they wish with these divine orders of church, marriage and family, culture, and government. The people located within these "divine orders" are not "commissioned from below" by earthly power relations. Within these divinely ordained social structures, they are genuinely "free" and protected from all forms of abuse by earthly powers accountable only to God. Therefore, God's commandment, as expressed in these divine mandates or "orders" through the reality of Jesus Christ, establishes both the above and below of human life.

Here God establishes a kind of inseparable and mutually delimiting relationship between human beings who submit to God's commandment of divine orders through Christ AND earthly power relations. Bonhoeffer is insisting here that even the "masters" of earthly power relations themselves have a "Master", which is God Himself. It is reasonable to argue that Bonhoeffer is here talking directly to Hitler and his dictatorial state "masters". I wonder if Hitler was really listening?

The state government of Nazi Germany cum 'government' does not possess a divine mandate "to confess Christ", certainly, according to Bonhoeffer. This particular 'mandate' was not divinely ordained, so to speak; it was not a divine order bestowed to the Christian Church. The divine mandate of government is to provide a "restraining force" to the destructive powers of chaos (Ibid., p 67), a kind of "anti-God nothingness" opposed to all divine orders and human life on earth itself (Ibid., pp 65-67, 78-9, 134, 288-89, 297).

Instead, the main function of government is to protect and "preserve the world for the reality of Christ" by establishing justice and not by "the power of the sword" (Ibid., p. 22). Each divine order has its specific function(s) such that one divine order does NOT rule over another divine order. The church does not rule over the government, and the government does not rule over the church, the government does not rule over the family, and culture doesn't rule over the government and church.

It is the commandment of Jesus Christ solely that rules over church, marriage and family, culture, and government, meaning they are free to exercise their functions as divinely ordered. It is easy to understand here that Bonhoeffer was developing a theological understanding of the institutional structures of society specifically to counter the dictatorial impulse of the Nazi German state interfering in deterministic fashion into every German institution from church to family to marriage to work to education to medicine and much more. What Bonhoeffer was telling Hitler and his cronies was that the institutions of society are sacred, each with their own divinely ordained functions, and it is un-Godly to compel them to conform to a Nazi worldview.

### **12. Final Comments**

The aim of this essay was to attempt a brief sketch of how the socio-political context within which Bonhoeffer engaged in theological thoughts and writings significantly influenced the development of central theological ideas and concepts. The

argument here is that Bonhoeffer's "Ethics" cannot be adequately understood apart from the socio-political context of Hitler's dictatorship and the Nazi National Socialist political regime operating during that historical period.

What's more, his active role in the national and international resistance movement against Hitler and the Nazi state machinery, working fervently to undermine and destroy it in coordination with other like-minded nationals and internationals, both inside and outside of the Protestant Christian church, provided for Bonhoeffer a front-row seat to the inner workings of an evil political machine. Unlike most other Christians in his native Germany at that time, Bonhoeffer was determined to put his Christian beliefs into concrete, meaningful political action.

Consequently, he formulated a theology to respond to what he viewed were its transgression against God, humanity, and society. All of his discussions in his Ethics book about conscience, freedom, the Christian faith, responsibility, and even his central concept of "responsible action" were conceptual constructions formulated in direct response to the horrific activities of the German state he was witnessing on a daily basis and the difficulties he was facing during his direct involvement in efforts to undermine and destroy Hitler's Nazi regime even to the point of participating in efforts to kill Hitler himself. This was an involvement that would eventually force him to forfeit his life by hanging in one of the very same concentration camps employed by that regime at that very same time to exterminate Jewish men, women, and children whom he spent the last remaining period of his life ministering in prison (Barnett in Bonhoeffer, *ibid.*, p. 318).

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