

The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon Revisited

In 2004 I published *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*, which may be read as a sort of preface to the present volume. I have been pleased by the response to that book. My only regret is that several aspects of the Bonhoeffer phenomenon came to my attention only after it appeared.

Seeking to be comprehensive in my description of the “material culture” of Bonhoeffer studies, I included various editions of Bonhoeffer’s own writings (ranging from Fortress Press’s critical edition of his collected works to volumes packaged and marketed for devotional use); Bethge’s huge biography; a series of shorter biographical texts designed for Christian edification; three fictionalized accounts of Bonhoeffer’s life; one book of “Christian fiction” in which he is a major character; five dramas; four films; and a Bonhoeffer icon. However, a number of monuments to Bonhoeffer’s “sainthood” have come to my attention in the two years since *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon* appeared.

These include seven films;ⁱ a “sonnet-sequence” on Bonhoeffer’s “faith and life”;ⁱⁱ four additional plays and a filmscript;ⁱⁱⁱ a “Heroes of Conscience” benefit concert honoring Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi; a jazz recital in memory of Bonhoeffer by the Dave Brubeck Trio; a CD of *Bonhoeffer-Triptychon* distributed by Vienna Modern Masters; a stained-glass portrait of Bonhoeffer at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin; a Lutheran church in Willmar, Minnesota, that includes Bonhoeffer’s name in a saintly “Circle of Names” adorning the sanctuary wall;^{iv} a wood carving of Bonhoeffer and other saints on a tryptich panel at Messiah Lutheran Church in Santa Cruz, California; a depiction of Bonhoeffer in “The Icon of the New Martyrs” in the Basilica di San Bartolomeo all’Isola Tiberina in Rome; a greeting card adorned with Bonhoeffer’s likeness and accompanying text; and an “inspiring gift book” called *Christmas with Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

If there is no way to ensure that one has identified every reference to Bonhoeffer in popular culture, this is in part because it is difficult to anticipate where they will be found. This fact dawned on me recently while I perused the religion section of a large bookstore. Two of the books I opened were John Shelby Spong’s most recent offering and a study of contemporary martyrdom by members of a Christian rap group. While it is difficult to imagine texts farther apart on the spectrum of American Christian culture, the one thing they did have in common was Bonhoeffer. Spong introduces his *A New Christianity for a New World* with an epigraph from Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison*, while *Jesus Freaks* includes no fewer than three references to the German martyr.^v

In terms of *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*’s argument, my description of the “universal” Bonhoeffer would have been strengthened by reference to *Bonhoeffer’s Ethic of Discipleship* by Kenneth Earl Morris. Morris offers a psychological interpretation of Bonhoeffer that emphasizes his “stature as a thoroughly modern person” whose life represents “an achievement of liberation.”^{vi} Another explicit attempt to portray the theologian in universal terms may be found in Hermes Donald Kreilkamp’s article “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet of Human Solidarity,” where Bonhoeffer is described as “pressing for an integrative solution to human needs . . . striving toward human solidarity and the fellowship of the spirit.”^{vii}

Similarly, my report on the “liberal” Bonhoeffer would have benefited from awareness of two books by British scholars. The first is Peter Selby’s *Grace and Mortgage*, in which Bonhoeffer’s question about the identity of Jesus Christ “for us today” becomes the basis for a Christian response to the global debt economy.^{viii} The second is Keith W. Clements’ book *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, in which Clements discusses Bonhoeffer as “peacemaker and liberator,” “the Confessing Church tradition and its relation to patriotism in a nuclear age,” and “South Africa and the cost of confession.”^{ix} In addition to describing the allure of the liberal Bonhoeffer, Clements eloquently expresses the universal appeal I tried to illumine with the image of Bonhoeffer as “bridge.” Bonhoeffer’s story, writes Clement, is:

At the simply human level a deeply stirring saga, whose appeal will not be confined to the Christian, or to those who look to him as a theological resource. One so socially privileged, so culturally rich, so gifted intellectually, who has every opportunity to enjoy what he has and to exploit it for his own fulfillment, yet who chooses to live without privileges, accepting risks and making ventures for justice at a time when so many compromised themselves—there is a universal appeal in this. He belongs not first to church history or to the Christian camp but to the human race, and he stands among those who, regardless of tradition or culture, represent the further possibilities of the human spirit.^x

On the other side of the theological spectrum, I would expand my description of the “evangelical” Bonhoeffer with reference to Jesus People USA Evangelical Covenant Church, an intentional community in uptown Chicago. In a review of recent literature on Bonhoeffer in the church’s *Cornerstone Magazine*, Chris Rice notes that during JPUSA’s founding in the mid-1970s Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* was “required reading”; in fact, one of the few appeals to authority in the group’s pamphlet “Meet Our Family” is a quote from the book many evangelicals refer to simply as “*Cost*.” “As we understand it,” Rice explains, “*Discipleship* wrestles Christianity away [from] the idolatry of Christian nationalism. But beyond that, it returns faith to its original allegiance—Jesus Christ himself. In Bonhoeffer’s unflinching reading of the Sermon on the Mount we find the Christ who means what he says.”^{xi}

I refer in *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon* to a genre of books that verify Bonhoeffer’s popular sainthood by placing him among those who have lived extraordinary Christian lives. One I failed to mention, *Cloud of Witnesses* by Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday, includes Bonhoeffer in its catalog of “saints, prophets and witnesses.”^{xii} A book in my own library that I somehow overlooked—Malcolm Muggeridge’s *A Third Testament*—provides further evidence of Bonhoeffer’s secure place in the pantheon of western saints. Muggeridge’s “testament” refers to six heroes of the spirit—Augustine, Pascal, Blake, Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, and Bonhoeffer—who share an ability “to relate their time to eternity.” Muggeridge does not call Bonhoeffer a “saint,” but he does confer a sort of beatification when he writes that in his prison cell “the theologian became a mystic, the pastor became a martyr, and the teacher produced, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, one of the great contemporary classics of Christian literature.”^{xiii}

My attempt to describe Bonhoeffer's functional sainthood would have been aided by David F. Ford's *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*. Ford concludes his study with a chapter on Bonhoeffer and "polyphonic living" that offers an insightful elaboration of the notion of holiness implicit in Bonhoeffer's reflections from prison, particularly the idea that our love for God is a "kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint."^{xiv} Bonhoeffer is crucial to Ford's argument because he is identified, along with Thérèse of Lisieux, as a *saint* through whose "worldly holiness of faith" we may fruitfully engage the theological issues of justification, sanctification, and vocation.^{xv}

Several studies of Bonhoeffer had yet to appear when I completed *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*. These include Vivienne Blackburn's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil: A Study In Christian Responsiveness*, Stanley Hauerwas's *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, Renate Bethge's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life*, Stephen Plant's *Bonhoeffer*, and Craig J. Slane's *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment*.^{xvi} Each of these studies contributes to the Bonhoeffer phenomenon—none more than Hauerwas's *Performing the Faith*, which though naming Bonhoeffer in its title ignores him on three-quarters of its pages. For understanding Bonhoeffer's reception, however, Slane's is the most significant.

Slane relies on the "formal pattern" of Jewish-Christian martyrdom to explore plausible connections between "the classic pattern of martyrdom and Bonhoeffer's trail to death."^{xvii} He thus relies on martyrdom as a "reading key" for Bonhoeffer's life and thought, which in turn is used to elucidate "new dimensions of martyrdom . . . surfacing in our own historical epoch."^{xviii} This approach to establishing Bonhoeffer's identity as martyr not only illumines the continuity between his clashes with a pagan state and those of classical martyrs (which is Slane's focus), but confirms my argument in *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon* that Bonhoeffer's story is told, remembered, and imagined in ways that conform to the Christian hagiographical imagination.

ⁱ According to Wilfried Schulz, by 2000 there were eleven films in German or English dealing with Bonhoeffer, nine of them documentaries. Adding Martin Doblmeier's *Bonhoeffer* (2003), the current total seems to be twelve, seven of which I was not aware of when writing *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*. See Wilfried Schulz, "Filme über Dietrich Bonhoeffer," paper presented at the Eighth International Bonhoeffer Congress, Berlin, August 25, 2000, in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

ⁱⁱ James Snyder, *Do Not Surrender: The Faith and Life of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Roseville, Calif.: Dry Bones Press, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ The film script is Bill Alden, Bekah Dannelley, and Andrezej Krakowski, "Bonhoeffer" (West Tisbury, Mass.: Pilgrim Productions, 2000). The plays are Constantino V. Riccardi, "Egmont and the Theologian," in *The Agony of Shopping and Other Plays* (Redlands, Calif.: Contra Mundum Publications, 1986); Nancy Axelrod, "Knight: A Play in Two Acts" (1995), in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York; "Bonhoeffer" (2005), written and performed by Peter Krummeck

and directed by Christopher Weare at the Playhouse Studio in Winnipeg; and “Emil’s Enemies,” a play by Douglas Huff of Gustavus Adolphus College.

^{iv} The Circle of Names at Vinge Lutheran Church in Willmar, Minnesota, is described in a church brochure: “The people of God of all times is symbolized by the names of representative ‘witnesses’ from the histories of the Old and New Testament and of the church. The blank spaces are for the worshipper’s own name and those of witnesses particularly important to her or him. The ‘cloud of witnesses’ verse is from Hebrews 12 and was carved by sculptor Arnold Flaten of Northfield.” This information was provided by Phil Holzman, Director of Music Ministries, Vinge Lutheran Church, Willmar, Minnesota in personal correspondence during July, 2005.

^v John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002); DC Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs, *Jesus Freaks: Stories of Those Who Stood for Jesus: The Ultimate Jesus Freaks* (Bloomington, Minn.: Bethany House, 1999).

^{vi} Kenneth Earl Morris, *Bonhoeffer’s Ethic of Discipleship: A Study in Social Psychology, Political Thought and Religion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).

^{vii} Hermes Donald Kreilkamp, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet of Human Solidarity,” *Spirituality Today* 36:2: 151–61.

^{viii} Peter Selby, *Grace and Mortgage: The Language of Faith and the Debt of the World* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1997).

^{ix} Keith W. Clements, *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Bristol: Bristol Baptist College, 1990).

^x *Ibid.*, 2, 11.

^{xi} Chris Rice, “Bonhoeffer after Sixty Years: Dietrich Bonhoeffer as We Understand Him at Jesus People USA Evangelical Covenant Church,”

http://www.cornerstonemag.com/pages/show_page.asp?694. According to Rice, the group understands Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* “as a fresh modern call to follow Jesus wherever he calls, from a man whose life finally involved literally obeying Jesus unto death. . . . While we may not be under a Nazi state, nationalism, consumerism, and militarism have won the hearts and minds of Americans and a lust for individualism and personal power controls us. . . . While Bonhoeffer lived uniquely as a man of his times, his example helps us focus on the context, purpose, and vision we have for our own times.”

^{xii} Jim Wallis and Joyce Hollyday, eds., *Cloud of Witnesses*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991). See also the recent publication by David P. Gushee, *Only Human: Christian Reflections on the Journey toward Wholeness*, Enduring Questions in Christian Life Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), where Bonhoeffer is presented as one of four Christians exemplifying “moral greatness” (the others are William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale and Martin Luther King Jr.).

^{xiii} Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 14, 196.

^{xiv} Letter to Eberhard Bethge, May 20, 1944, cited in David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 254.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 11. Ford writes: “To risk a simple summary of why these two are continually fruitful for so many today: Thérèse’s little way is small enough to slip into any life in

which daily loving is important; Bonhoeffer's polyphony is capacious enough to sustain interrogative, intelligent faith in a Western civilization shaped by the Hebraic and the Hellenic together, formed in the last millennium by Medieval Christianity, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and more recent modernity, and in fundamental need of a wisdom informed by what is seen 'from below'. . . . Thérèse's vocation is love and Bonhoeffer's is wisdom" (264).

^{xvi} Vivienne Blackburn, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil: A Study In Christian Responsiveness*, Religions and Discourse (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004); Renate Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Brief Life*, trans. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers (London: Continuum, 2004); Craig J. Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004).

^{xvii} Slane, *Bonhoeffer as Martyr*, 77.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 34.