

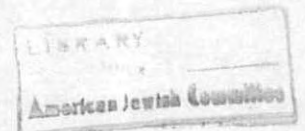
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER:  
A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

by

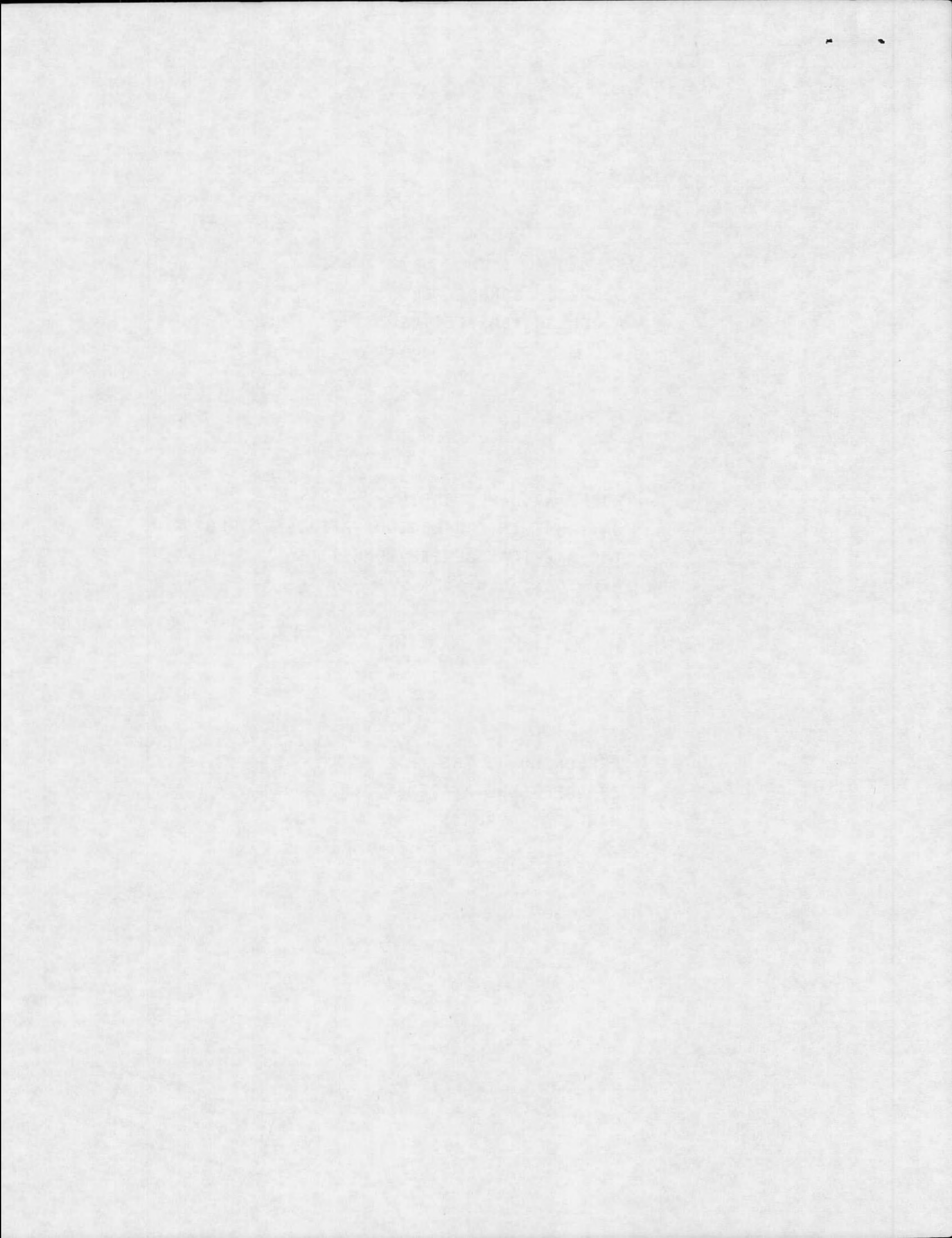
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Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer was not even 40 years old when he was executed in Berlin by the Nazis in April, 1945, he has clearly emerged as the dominant figure of the German Church's resistance during the demonic years of 1933-1945. Each year sees the appearance of new articles and books about Bonhoeffer, while sadly, each year also sees the deaths of the men and women who actually knew and worked with him.

As one sign of the keen interest in Bonhoeffer, the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, one of America's most prestigious centers of Christian study, recently dedicated a handsome study/lounge in memory of Bonhoeffer. He was a student at Union in the early 1930s, and he visited UTS just prior to the Second World War. Bonhoeffer biographies abound, and his major works, ten published volumes and six works of collected papers, have been translated into English. In sum, he has become a major figure in Western Christian thought.

As often happens in such cases, many young people, from both sides of the Atlantic, who were born long after 1945, have made Bonhoeffer into a cult like figure. In some centers of theological study, the two words "Dietrich Bonhoeffer" are today invoked with great solemnity and sanctity, but often without real knowledge of the man and his times, or the man and his teachings. Before he is totally lost in the mist of legend, it might be useful to look at Bonhoeffer's brief life, and assess

the impact of his teachings for both Christians and Jews.

Bonhoeffer's life and thoughts are well known to us especially because of the excellent 1970 biography written by Eberhard Bethge: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, MAN OF VISION, MAN OF COURAGE. And in 1962 Martin Marty edited a useful volume, THE PLACE OF BONHOEFFER: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES IN HIS THOUGHT. Edwin Robertson's NO RUSTY SWORDS: LETTERS, LECTURES, AND NOTES, 1928-1936, published in 1965, provides an English translation of Bonhoeffer's works written during that crucial 8 year period. Finally, there are translations of Bonhoeffer's later writings including his LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON. All of these important volumes are complemented by a large number of monographs and articles about Bonhoeffer. There is no problem in either reading Bonhoeffer or reading about him. The problems lie elsewhere.

As any one familiar with the gathering of intelligence data knows, it is relatively easy to obtain information. The difficulty comes when we attempt to analyze and evaluate the data we have obtained. So it is with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The real question is what do we make of the man, and what impact has he had, in this case, upon American Jewish thinking.

Because the facts of his life are widely known, I will focus instead upon the just mentioned critical question, and I will do so from a personal perspective. Since 1968 I have been

deeply engaged in Christian-Jewish relations both in North America and overseas as well. That perspective has put in me in close touch with most of the major Christian and Jewish interreligious personalities. In addition, I have studied the significant trends and themes that are part of this exciting and important endeavor. And it is from this perspective of two decades that I write.

The German Church Struggle during the Nazi era has a current compelling interest in the United States. Americans, prior to the black civil rights struggle, the Watergate scandals, and the Vietnam War, were often highly critical of German Christian leadership between 1933 and 1945. and little, if any, attention was given to this aspect of the Nazi era. It was generally assumed that the German Churches, both Evangelical(I use that term in its European and not in its contemporary American meaning) and Roman Catholic, were willing collaborators and accomplices of the monstrous Nazi leadership.

In those years immediately after the War, America appeared to be an innocent, righteous superpower, whose people were quick to judge German behavior during the Holocaust. It was only after the often violent struggle for black civil rights in the 1960s(a struggle that I was privileged to participate in along with thousands of other rabbis and Christian pastors), the wrenching and divisive war in Southeast Asia, and the Watergate

scandal that resulted in a U.S. President's resignation from office...it was only after those turbulent and painful events, only then, I believe, were American religious leaders truly ready to confront the ambiguities and the ambivalences, the cowardice and the courage, the weakness and the strength of the German Church struggle. And only then were Americans, both Christians and Jews, psychologically and spiritually prepared to look closely at the best known leader of that complex movement, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

That is why, even though friends, associates, and admirers of Bonhoeffer wrote extensively about him, he and his era did not at first engage the attention of many American Jewish and Christian leaders. It was, I strongly believe, only when the United States "lost its innocence", that we were ready to look at Bonhoeffer and his times.

There is today more sympathy and a greater appreciation of what the Bonhoeffers, the Martin Niemollers, and the other leaders of the Confessing Church had to encounter while living in a criminally totalitarian society. But let me be crystal clear on this point.

While some American Christian and Jewish leaders did fail to speak out in criticism of the U. S. Government's misguided policies, both domestic and international, during the past two decades, thankfully, many other religious leaders were in the

forefront in condemning American public officials for a series of immoral actions and even criminal acts.

Another point is crucial, as well. During the civil rights, Watergate, and Vietnam periods, the United States remained a democratic society with an intact and operating system of governmental checks and balances, a free press, a free religious life, and a free academic community. So, let it be understood that the America of the anti black Jim Crow laws, of the Vietnam War, and of Watergate, was never politically spelled with a "K", as in AMERIKA. Some critics asserted that the United States was a Fascist and/or Nazi like state, but they were wrong.

Perhaps a medical analogy might be helpful. America, when it behaved immorally, could be likened to a body politic stricken with a dangerous virus that, if unchecked, could damage the entire system. Nazi Germany, on the other hand, was a body politic, totally consumed by a monstrous cancer that devoured and destroyed millions of people in the process.

With all these caveats in mind, and with the clear knowledge that all historical analogies are inaccurate, nonetheless, America's recent travails have done at least this much: they have provided a more empathetic audience for the story of Bonhoeffer and his colleagues as they confronted the murderous pathology of Nazism.

Bonhoeffer's personal heroism (he was executed by the Nazis just a month before the War was over), his stirring sermons and articles, his commitment to concrete action ("Not in the flight of ideas, but only in action is freedom. Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living", he wrote)...all of these things touch us deeply.

We read with admiration his well crafted and brilliant attack in 1933 on the so called "Aryan Paragraph" of the Nazi Civil Service regulations. Under that edict all "non Aryan" (read "Jews") officials, including ministers of the State Church, had to retire, except for World War One veterans or those non Aryans who had lost a son or father in that War.

Bonhoeffer, from his Christian perspective, correctly saw that this "Paragraph" was an attack upon the basic ministry of the Church. Since baptism, entry into the fellowship of Christ, is so important in that ministry, any attempt by the State to exclude from leadership those who convert through baptism to Christianity robs the Church of its very mission, its very purpose. And since Jesus of Nazareth and his early followers were all "non Aryans", the Nazi regulation was all the more reprehensible. Bonhoeffer wrote:

Pastors are not State officials. Hence official regulations cannot be applied to them under any circumstances...It is therefore an ecclesiastical impossibility to exclude, as a matter of principle,



Jewish-Christian members from any office of the Church.

Bonhoeffer's fury against the "Aryan Paragraph" was perhaps further fueled by the fact that his brother in law, was a "non Aryan Christian", and his closest friend in 1933 was a "non Aryan" pastor. But it is clear from Bonhoeffer's actions that his sharp critique of the "Paragraph" would have been just as pointed and public without the personal factor being present. Bonhoeffer clearly believed, from a firm Christian foundation, that baptism means full membership in the Church, and no State has the right to change that belief.

Bonhoeffer battled courageously against the infamous "German Christian" movement, which was often called the "Brown Church", because so many of its leaders wore Storm Troopers' uniforms at Synod meetings. The "German Christians" demanded the creation of one national Protestant Church, the application of the Fuhrer principle and anti Semitism within the church, the elimination of all "Jewish influence" from teaching, liturgy, and preaching, and the belief in an "Aryan Jesus". Bonhoeffer considered the movement a heresy since it so completely capitulated to the Nazi ideology and belief system.

We read with admiration his famous statement made in 1938 after the brutal Crystal Night pogroms: "Nur wer für die Juden schreit, darf auch gregorianisch singen" ("Only the person who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants"), and Bethge

reminds us that Bonhoeffer always quoted Proverbs 31, verse 8 when discussing the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany: "Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction."

One is deeply moved by Bonhoeffer's climactic, and ultimately fatal decision to become an anti Nazi activist when he elected to work with his brother in law, Hans von Dohnanyi, in a political conspiracy against Hitler. As a secret agent of the German anti Nazi group, Bonhoeffer is credited with sending Jews across the border into Switzerland. And earlier, in 1933, through his friend, Professor Paul Lehmann of Union Theological Seminary, he provided first hand knowledge about the violent anti Semitism of the Nazis to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, then America's foremost Jewish leader.

Bethge recounts that Bonhoeffer helped many Jewish refugees in the 1930s while serving in England as a Chaplain. While there he became a close associate of Bishop George Bell of Chichester, who was a leading anti Nazi cleric.

Arrested in April, 1943 by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer was kept in prison(though with a small library) until his execution two years later. His final letters reveal an emerging sense of "Christian realism", a "this worldliness", an increased emphasis upon the Hebrew Scriptures, and an intriguing concept of a "religionless Christianity". His prison letters represent

enormous spiritual growth. Sadly, we can only speculate where his brilliant mind would have led Bonhoeffer if his life had not ended so prematurely. Not surprisingly, as early as 1938, Bonhoeffer had told some seminarians that "Secular freedom, too, is worth dying for."

Bonhoeffer, it must always be remembered, did what very few of his fellow pastors did. He crossed the line from purely spiritual resistance from within the church (sermons, declarations, letters, articles, and lectures), and bravely and tragically moved into direct political action against Hitler and the Nazis. As Bethge points out, in his act of "this worldliness", Dietrich Bonhoeffer was "entirely alone". Bethge writes:

The Confessing Church was careful not to include in the intercession lists individuals who suffered imprisonment for so-called purely political reasons. Bonhoeffer knew the situation perfectly well and did not expect his church to include him on the list. But he might have expected that there would be a process later, a process from which would emerge an ethic of civic opposition or even of revolutionary resistance.

Much more can, and has been written about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's anti Nazi activities, his leadership in the Confessing Church, his sturdy sense of Christian "realism", his courage in actively combatting Nazism, his acts of personal

friendship and assistance, and his hopes and aspirations for his beloved Church. At a time when there were so few models of Christian courage, at a moment in history when the Church seemed to be an accomplice, at worst, or a silent observer, at best, of the Nazi movement, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a powerful corrective.

It is that Bonhoeffer, the politically active anti Nazi, who paid with his life for his activities, it is that Bonhoeffer who has resonated within the Jewish community. Where American Jews have heard of him, it is this side of his story that they respond to with positive appreciation. And that side of Bonhoeffer, I assert, is a stirring reminder that even in the midst of demonic, systemic evil, there was at least one Christian leader who rebelled.

But (and it is a large "but") there is another side to the Bonhoeffer coin that needs to be carefully examined. I add the "but", not to spoil Bonhoeffer's well earned legacy, but rather to indicate that there is more to Dietrich Bonhoeffer vis a vis Jews and Judaism; there is another dimension that needs to be examined.

I am indebted to Professor Ruth Zerner for her brilliant monograph, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews", that she delivered at the 1974 Conference on the Church Struggle and the Holocaust. Professor Zerner, an American Christian, has graphically illuminated the "other" side of the Bonhoeffer legacy.

In addition, two Jewish thinkers, Professors Emil Fackenheim and Richard Rubinstein, have also raised some profound questions about Bonhoeffer and his attitude towards Jews and Judaism.

Zerner correctly notes:

Bonhoeffer's scattered observations about Jews and Jewish experiences do include problematic passages, ambiguities, and contradictions. In many cases these tensions and evasions may be only explained by the practical cautions and pernicious exigencies of life in Nazi Germany. I do not intend to suggest that Bonhoeffer was an antisemite. Rather, like all of us, he was to some extent a victim of his background and his perspectives...Bonhoeffer's...diagnosis and prognosis of Jewish historical development are...most disturbing...are typical of pre-Holocaust, pre-Vatican II, Christian thinking.

Although Bonhoeffer was one of the first Christian leaders to respond to the "Aryan Paragraph" in 1933, he made a clear distinction between baptized "non Aryans", that is Jewish-Christians, and the rest of the Jews of Germany. In a 1933 statement that makes us most uncomfortable today he declared:

Without doubt the Jewish question is one of the historical problems which our state(Nazi Germany) must deal with, and without doubt the state is justified in adopting new methods here...Thus even today, in the Jewish question, it(the Church) cannot address the state directly and demand of it some definite action of a different nature...

Bonhoeffer did not, at that time, envision the Church making any direct political statement to the State about the situation of German Jews, although a few years later he, did, as an individual, take political action himself. As a Lutheran pastor, Bonhoeffer clearly expresses the traditional "Two Kingdom" doctrine that makes sharp distinctions between the proper roles of the Church and the State in society.

To his credit, in 1940 Bonhoeffer confessed to the inadequacy of this traditional position when a Christian is confronted with an evil state like Nazi Germany:

The Church makes confession of her timidity, her evasiveness, her dangerous concessions. She has repeatedly been untrue to her office as watchman and her office as consoler...She was dumb, when she should have cried out, since the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. She has not found the right word to speak in the right manner and at the right time...She is to be held answerable for the lives of the weakest and most defenseless of the brethren of Jesus Christ.

By 1944, imprisoned by the Gestapo and facing death, Bonhoeffer reached the conclusion that the Christian Church, even the Confessing Church of the 1934 Barmen Declaration, even that Church was "on the defensive" with an "unwillingness to take risks in the service of humanity..The place of religion is taken by the Church, that is...as it should be, but the world is made to depend upon itself and left to its own devices, and that is

all wrong."

Clearly, by 1944 Bonhoeffer had crossed his personal Rubicon when he abandoned any real hope that the Church would take risks; neither for his fellow Christians, nor for "the service of humanity." In a profound existential sense, Bonhoeffer was "entirely alone".

Professor Emil Fackenheim, a prominent Jewish philosopher, has criticized Bonhoeffer because the prison letters, do not specifically mention Jewish suffering and martyrdom. Bethge defends Bonhoeffer by noting that four Bonhoeffer men were in prison at the time, all trying to end the Nazi regime, and "the incredible suffering of the Jews." But Fackenheim's critique centers mostly on the ambiguous even troublesome aspects of the prison letters.

Bonhoeffer, even at the end of his life when he turned more and more to the Hebrew Scriptures for strength and comfort, always saw those Scriptures as a prelude to the coming of Jesus, the Christ. He maintained that the Ten Commandments can "never be preached in abstract detachment from the gospel." The Hebrew Bible's constant emphasis upon "the concepts of repentance, faith, justification, and rebirth" brought Bonhoeffer solace and renewal while he was in prison. Nevertheless, he was either unable or unwilling to see the Hebrew Scriptures in their own terms, that is without any reference to the Christian gospel.

Walter Harrelson, a distinguished American Christian scholar, offers a sharp critique of Bonhoeffer's Biblical views:

If the Old Testament has no meaning for faith apart from its meaning in Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer's position), then those who---in faith---do not declare Jesus to be the Messiah are simply left without their Scripture, are they not?... I find it intolerable to maintain that the Jews who went to death in Buchenwald and Dachau were in any less favorable position to comprehend the meaning of God's redemptive love, witnessed to in their Scripture, than were Bonhoeffer and his fellow Christian martyrs... Bonhoeffer simply removes the Bible of the Jews from their hands... Bonhoeffer, if we take his words at face value, does not assign much meaning to the faith and hope of Israel FOR Israel, or of the Jewish people today. The unity of the Bible is given only in Jesus Christ; only in Christ is David understood; only in Christ is creation understood; only in Christ are the prayers of the men of the Psalter also the Word of God to man. This seems to me to be entirely unjustified, exegetically and theologically.

Traditionally, Christian thinkers have maintained two polarized views of the Jewish people. The first is that the Jews are "the brethren of Jesus Christ", and those Jews who have been baptized in the true faith have, in theological parlance, "come home" to Christianity.

The opposing polar view is that the Jews represent the "Judas figure", the "people who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross." In this theological construction, the Jews are cursed and punished by God, condemned to be the perpetual outsider, the universal pariah people. As Rubinstein succinctly



puts it, Jews in classic Christian teaching were perceived as either "the best of saints or the worse of sinners, but never simply as a human being."

Bonhoeffer reflects both of these extreme views. In his writings he employs such negative terms as "this mysterious people", "people loved and punished by God", and "the rejected people" to describe Jews. Only by baptism can the Jews, in Bonhoeffer's view, gain salvation and be at one with God. We are not surprised then by his spirited defense of Jewish-Christians within the Church.

But what about the Jews who remain faithful to their own tradition, who do not become baptized? In 1937 Bonhoeffer wrote that Jews as "Judas are the people, divided to its uttermost depths, from which Jesus came, for the chosen people, that had received the promise of the Messiah and yet could not love him in this way."

But because Bonhoeffer is Bonhoeffer, it is never so simple. "Who is Judas?", he rhetorically asks. "Faced with this question, are we able to do anything but say with the disciples, 'Lord, is it I? It is I?'" He clearly understood something else as well: "An expulsion of the Jews from the West must necessarily bring with it the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew." Ambiguities and ambivalences abound.

But there is enough in the life and teachings of Dietrich

Bonhoeffer to celebrate. He was a gallant figure in the German struggle against Nazism, but what is not needed is a mythological Bonhoeffer who is larger than life, a Bonhoeffer without ambivalences, ambiguities, and complexities. This is especially true when we discuss Christian-Jewish relations and his own perceptions of Jews and Judaism.

I see Bonhoeffer as a transition figure. He clearly and consistently expressed the traditional Lutheran views of his time and place about Jews and Judaism. He saw the Jews' ultimate conversion as the "end of the people's suffering." But towards the end of his life he appeared to transcend the teachings of his Church and he began to move towards an undefined "religionless Christianity". He understood that God wanted him to extend his compassion far beyond the narrow confines of his Church.

He is a transition figure, a pilgrim, because he was never able to complete his evolution from a theologically sturdy Lutheran pastor to a Christian universalist. And because he lived where he did and when he did, in the very bowels of a gangster state, he was thwarted in his attempt to fashion a new Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism.

Because of the many ambiguities surrounding Bonhoeffer, he has had limited impact and influence within the American Jewish community. He is, of course, widely respected for his anti Nazi activities, but he is not looked to as a major thinker

in building bridges of mutual respect and understanding between Christians and Jews. That role is left to others.

But there is another factor at work within the Jewish community: one that has to be carefully stated. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well born, well educated German Lutheran, was killed by the Nazis, but quite clearly he could have chosen another path that would have spared him a prison execution. He had a choice, and he consciously chose to do what he did with full knowledge of the consequences.

But it was not so for the Jews. The learned and the ignorant, the well born and the lowly, the scholars and the students, the atheists and the believers, and, of course, the baptized and the unbaptized, every Jew was a target for the Nazi murderers. Entire centers of Jewish learning, intellect, and piety were destroyed; countless teachers, professors, poets, religious thinkers, and artists were killed in those dreadful years. A world that once was exists no more. Nobel Laureate Elie Weisel has eloquently stated how it was during the Holocaust: "Not all the Nazi victims were Jews, but every Jew was a Nazi victim". It is against that staggering and crushing background that we mourn our 6,000,000 martyrs.

In analyzing Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian martyr, it is clear that his influence must, by the very nature of his teaching, be far greater in the Christian community than in the

Jewish community, And that is as it should be. But Christians and Jews can both share in the memories and teachings of our martyrs.

Jews can and do admire his courage. We greatly admire how Bonhoeffer attempted to balance the contemplative life of a scholar and teacher with the life of a political activist and fighter against Nazism. We can admire his persistent search for a broad universal response to evil, while remaining faithful to his unique religious tradition.

We can admire his impatience, especially at the end of his life, with those who were paralyzed in the face of evil by strict orthodoxy and doctrinal purity. The Confessing Church, in its famous Barmen Declaration of 1934, did not address the virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazis. The predominant theological influence of the Declaration gave it a narrow otherworldly Christology, rather than one that was deeply rooted ethically to this world. This inadequacy, in the face of Nazi barbarism and cruelty, is the Declaration's single greatest deficiency. And Bonhoeffer knew it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood as did few of his colleagues in Nazi Germany that "...the Church beheld the despotic application of brute force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred, murder without raising her voice on behalf of the victims and

without having found means of hastening to their aid." Surely, this is more than enough to constitute Dietrich Bonhoeffer's permanent legacy for both our communities.

