Claims on Bonhoeffer: The misuse of a theologian

by Karen V. Guth in the May 27, 2015 issue

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In a 2002 speech in Berlin thanking Germany for its support of the war on terrorism, President George W. Bush invoked none other than the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He compared the fight against terrorism to Bonhoeffer's "stand against Nazi rule," thereby aligning his stance with that of one of Christianity's most beloved modern martyrs.

Bush was hardly the first and certainly not the last to claim Bonhoeffer for his cause. In July 1993, pro-life advocate and abortion clinic bomber Paul Hill cited Bonhoeffer's involvement in "plotting the death of Hitler" to justify Hill's actions. For Hill, murdering abortion providers was the only way to stop what he regarded as America's own holocaust of innocent life.

In 2005, Christian televangelist Pat Robertson invoked Bonhoeffer, "who lived under the hellish conditions of Nazi Germany," in calling for the United States to assassinate Venezuela president Hugo Chávez and Iraq leader Saddam Hussein.

Even more bizarrely, a journalist at an online magazine recently referred to "the dissident anti-Nazi" Bonhoeffer in arguing that had Syrian rebels perpetrated the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta, Syria, in August 2013, their act would have

been justified as an effort to elicit international intervention.

If the evidence were limited to the George W. Bushes, Pat Robertsons, and Paul Hills of the world, the religious left could dismiss these appeals as misguided or condemn them as the product of twisted logic. But in her 2003 book *Just War against Terror*, Jean Bethke Elshtain, a respected scholar at the University of Chicago, also invokes Bonhoeffer, “the anti-Nazi martyr,” to make a case for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Although Elshtain’s brief references to Bonhoeffer certainly reveal a more sophisticated understanding of Bonhoeffer’s ethical thought, she too trades on his moral authority to bolster her cause.

Appealing to Bonhoeffer to justify such a range of moral choices is deeply ironic, for it is at odds with Bonhoeffer’s own ethical reasoning. Clifford Green has rightly argued that such approaches reduce Bonhoeffer’s rich reflection on Christian discipleship, the christological foundation of community, and the church’s vocation in the world “to a sound bite or a principle either supporting or opposing the use of violence.”

Public invocations of Bonhoeffer tend to ignore his emphasis on particular contexts and on the need for constant discernment. Bonhoeffer places utmost importance on active discernment of the will of God in each new time and place. To assume that action in one time or context—even Bonhoeffer’s own action—can be replicated in others or used as a straightforward guide violates his central theological and ethical point of departure: “Who is Christ actually for us today?”

Answering this question is no simple task. For Bonhoeffer, the very structure of reality is Christocentric. “The knowledge of Jesus Christ,” Bonhoeffer writes in *Ethics*, is “a living reality. It is not something that is given once and for all, a static entity, something possessed. With every new day, therefore, the question arises, how, today, here, in this situation, can I remain and be preserved within this new life with God, with Jesus Christ?”

If Christians are to follow Christ, they must first engage in a process of conformation to Christ that enables them to discern the nature of reality. Only then are Christians able to hear and obey the command of God in their context.

If, as Green suggests, public appeals to Bonhoeffer often decontextualize his thought, they also narrow down his historical setting. The appeals by Bush, Hill, Robertson, and Elshtain all focus on Bonhoeffer’s identity as a Nazi resister. Stranger

still, they do so in the course of justifying forms of violence other than tyrannicide—the particular form of violence relevant to the Nazi resistance.

Identifying Bonhoeffer primarily as an “anti-Nazi” relegates his identities as pastor and theologian to supporting roles. It does not attend adequately to Bonhoeffer’s entire lived witness or the relevance of his theology and explorations of Christian community beyond the context of Nazi Germany.

Many who cite Bonhoeffer to condemn various forms of violence make the same mistakes. They often undermine the contextual emphasis of Bonhoeffer’s ethics either by citing Bonhoeffer’s pacifism as justification for any and all action taken on behalf of nonviolent causes or by drawing too close a connection between their own context and Nazi Germany. They too remove Bonhoeffer’s thought from its christological framework and focus in on his Nazi context to enhance the direness of their chosen cause.

Another form of decontextualization occurs when public figures enlist Bonhoeffer under the auspices of a “responsibility” ethic that reduces and distorts Bonhoeffer’s own conception of responsibility. Appeals that justify violence, for example, associate Bonhoeffer with extreme political situations that too easily connect “responsible” action with law breaking, moral contamination, and the use of force.

For Bonhoeffer, responsibility, or *Stellvertretung*, constitutes the very structure of life and discipleship. Scholars translate this term as “vicarious representative action.” Its meaning derives from Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christ as the vicarious representative for humanity. Jesus is “the human being for others.” As such, being responsible involves the daily task of “being there for others” in response to the command of God made concrete in the mandates of marriage and family, work, government, and church.

Bonhoeffer describes the quintessential experience of responsibility as “the encounter with other human beings,” indicating that no one escapes this central ethical task. Everyone from parents to world leaders exists in relationships that afford daily opportunities to “be there for others.”

Bonhoeffer does indeed discuss the possibility that responsible action may in certain extraordinary situations take the form of a “free venture” that violates civil law or the law of God. But this form of responsible action is “extraordinary, the borderline case,” not to “be mistaken as the norm.” Responsibility is not something that one

undertakes only in extreme circumstances; it names the entire life of discipleship lived in response to Christ and the claim of others.

A further distortion of Bonhoeffer's conception of responsibility occurs when an understanding of responsible action is placed in the context of larger justifications of force.

Hill argues that murder is justified because it saves the lives of the unborn. Robertson suggests that the assassinations of Chávez and Hussein would be justified because they would accomplish the same ends as war but would be less expensive. Even Elshtain's support for the war in Iraq invokes Bonhoeffer in the broader context of a just war argument.

But for Bonhoeffer, responsible action in the form of a "free venture" enjoys no recourse to ideology, principles, or authorities possessing the power to pardon. Violations of God's law require not justification but an admission of guilt and an appeal to God for forgiveness.

We need not abandon Bonhoeffer as a model for Christian ethical action. The critical point is not whether Bonhoeffer's legacy provides a model for current discussions of war, peace, and resistance, but how. As important as it is to get it right when it comes to Bonhoeffer's life and the ethics of peace and violence, these tasks must not become substitutes for the difficult task of ethical discernment and moral responsibility.

Rather than simply invoking Bonhoeffer's moral authority for one's cause or presuming that assessments of what Bonhoeffer did in his context provide the christological blueprint for what we should do in ours, Bonhoeffer's witness stands as a testament to the difficulty and complexity of the Christian moral life. Bonhoeffer is indeed a moral role model—but less in the sense of providing concrete instruction than in reminding Christians of the constantly shifting nature of discipleship and the need for humility.

The emphasis Bonhoeffer places on the moral process of conformation to Christ and active discernment of the Christocentric nature of reality in one's particular time and place invites Christians to take responsibility for acting in accordance with the will of God. It also bids Christians to remain humble, because while the church must proclaim the command of God, it must also acknowledge that in doing so it may "take the name of God in vain."

How might we best avoid misuses of Bonhoeffer's legacy? Clarifying Bonhoeffer's situation goes some way toward limiting the ways his legacy might be abused, but it fails to address the deeper problems in using Bonhoeffer as moral authority.

Here recent feminist work on Bonhoeffer offers indispensable insight. His feminist interpreters are probably not surprised to see him invoked as an authority figure; after all, Bonhoeffer's very concept of responsibility assumes relationships of asymmetrical power and orders of authority within which the command of God is heard. In this sense, appeals to Bonhoeffer echo the emphasis on authority in his ethics.

But in another sense, such appeals violate trajectories in Bonhoeffer's thought that surface in *Letters and Papers from Prison* and that have been of particular interest to feminists and other liberationists: his emphasis on learning "to see . . . from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering."

Feminists have long been critical of approaches to Christian ethics that focus on the lone male authority figure. In light of Bonhoeffer's own claim that "it remains an experience of incomparable value" to have learned "the view from below," theologian Rachel Muers has called for appropriations of Bonhoeffer's legacy that shift moral focus from the lone male figure in the pulpit to the multitude of moral actors in the pews. Muers challenges us to consider how the desire for moral authority figures—however much it may replicate aspects of their own thought or practice—actually distorts their legacies and undermines our own responsibility to engage in the very ethical formation and discernment Bonhoeffer identifies as central to discipleship.

We cannot "be" for others unless we can see as others. Jesus, as the vicarious representative for humanity, gave up his Godly "view from above" to see "from the below" of humanity. Seeing from below, from the perspective of those who suffer, enables us to participate in Christ's being for others.

What if, rather than asking "What would Bonhoeffer do?" or claiming Bonhoeffer for our cause, we instead asked ourselves the central questions of his ethics: "Who is Christ actually for us today?" and how may Christ "take form among us today and here?"

Some recent scholarship helps answer this question by looking to the actual communities where Bonhoeffer experienced Christ and learned to see from below. Reggie L. Williams's book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, offers a prime example. Williams follows Bonhoeffer to Harlem, identifying the central role that his experience of the black, suffering Jesus at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church played in his own resistance to the Nazis. Williams argues that this experience informed Bonhoeffer's concept of responsibility. For Bonhoeffer, Christ is "the responsible human being par excellence" because he humbly stood in humanity's stead.

Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem was transformational, because it afforded a privileged Bonhoeffer the opportunity to put himself in another's place. He went to Harlem not "as the professor come to give oppressed people the benefit of his knowledge" but rather as a learner who "allowed himself to be vulnerable" by "empathically entering the epistemological process of others." Williams invites us to imagine how we, too, might be christologically transformed by putting ourselves in another's place.

Other work looks to contemporary Christian communities that are intentionally seeking to unlearn practices of privilege and learn the view from below. In her book *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*, Jennifer M. McBride points to the Eleuthero Community in Portland, Maine, and the Southeast White House in Washington, D.C., as two such communities. In Eleuthero's care for the environment and concern for the impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations and in the Southeast White House's presence as a house of hospitality in a neglected D.C. neighborhood, McBride sees embodiments of Christ. These communities are engaging in a "confession of sin unto repentant action."

As with Bonhoeffer in Harlem, these communities are committed to learning from those who suffer so as to "be for others." Such communities provide vivid demonstrations of the kind of responsible action that Bonhoeffer identified with Christ and that therefore lie at the heart of the church's mission.

Finally, there is a host of other work written by scholars outside of the field of Bonhoeffer studies that sheds light on how Christians of all traditions might learn to see from below. For example, Amy Levad's *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration*, proposes that Catholic Christians harness the power of Eucharist and of penance to see from the perspective of the

incarcerated so as to address mass incarceration—a phenomenon that legal scholar Michelle Alexander has described as “the New Jim Crow.”

It is not insignificant that Bonhoeffer wrote about “the view from below” just before being imprisoned himself. It was during his imprisonment that Bonhoeffer wrote some of his most moving reflections on Jesus as “the human being for others” and Christian faith as “participating in this being of Jesus” which involves a “liberation from self, through this ‘being-for-others’ unto death.”

These recent works of scholarship expand our imagination about how we might participate in Jesus’ being for others, enabling us to be what Bonhoeffer described as church: Christ existing as community. It is ironic that, for a theologian and pastor so interested in Christian community, Bonhoeffer has become the singular moral exemplar that he has. My guess is that Bonhoeffer would be alarmed not only by the use to which we have put his name but also by our obsession with his responsible action at the expense of our own. Perhaps the best way to both avoid the misuse of Bonhoeffer on questions of violence and to honor his legacy would be for churches to exist as Christ in ways that ensure that church communities replace him as the subject in future Bonhoeffer scholarship.

To Bonhoeffer’s challenging question, “Who is Christ for us today?” I don’t presume to have the answers. Indeed, one of the most important lessons Bonhoeffer offers is about the importance of concrete contexts, the constantly shifting nature of the task of discipleship, and the moral complexity that attends the church’s responsibility to humbly obey the command of God—all features that resist easy, general description. But looking at the church’s task as one of learning “to see . . . from below” is surely a fruitful one, and one more faithful to Bonhoeffer’s own ethics.