

The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon/Bonhoeffer as Martyr

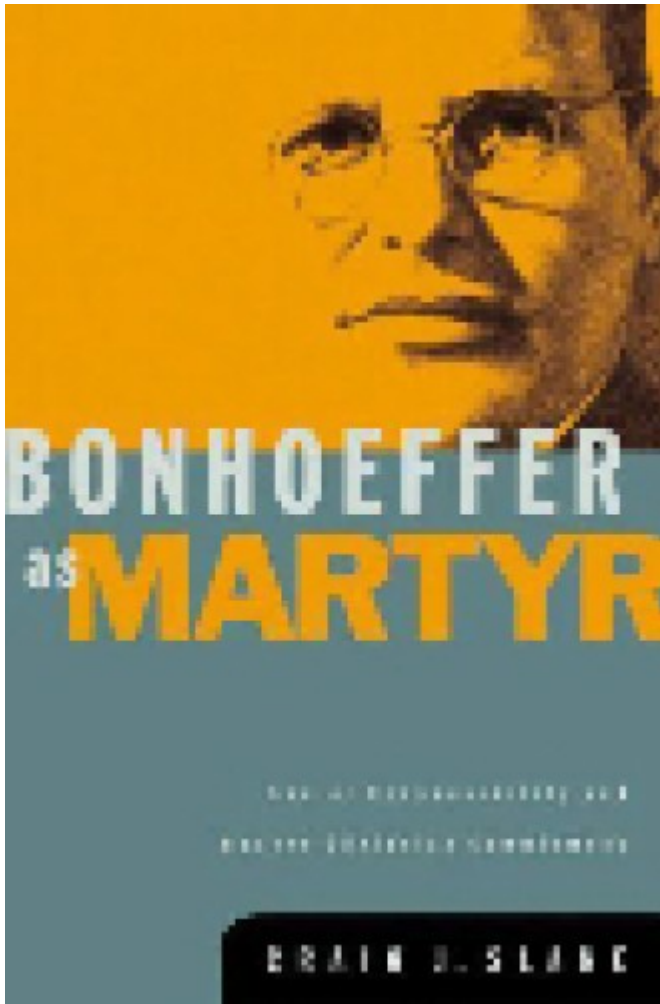
reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint

Stephen R. Haynes
Fortress



Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment

Craig J. Slane
Brazos

How should we refer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer? As a saint? A martyr? Protestant churches lack any official apparatus for designating one person “saintly” as opposed to the entire body of believers. Paul calls everyone in his churches “saints,” and Protestants dare speak no differently. As for martyrdom, Bonhoeffer was not executed for any overt religious reason. He was hanged for high treason, having taken part in the plot to assassinate Hitler. So the two titles have twin obstacles for us: we have no means to weigh someone’s merits or demerits, and even if we did, Bonhoeffer would likely fall short.

Yet two new books argue for the description of Bonhoeffer as saint and martyr. The first is really a book about books about Bonhoeffer. Stephen R. Haynes explores the wildly divergent uses to which Bonhoeffer's life and work have been put by an extraordinary variety of readers—from Vietnam veterans recovering from posttraumatic stress disorder to violent abortion protesters who claim his blessings on the murders they commit. Craig J. Slane's book is the more academic of the two, offering a reasoned theological defense of the popular claim that Bonhoeffer ought to be counted among those slain for confessing the faith. Each sheds light on Bonhoeffer's legacy. Yet each leaves the central question unasked: what precisely does it mean for a church to call someone a martyr or a saint? That's an ecclesiological question, and Protestants' inability to answer it may represent a fundamental ecclesiological problem.

Haynes's book feels like a work of theological journalism. He reports but only rarely passes judgment. The death-of-God theologians of the 1960s, today's more orthodox postliberals, liberation theologians, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, collects for Saint Dietrich, plays, academic monographs, popular films, sanctimonious evangelical fiction, travel groups that specialize in Bonhoeffer pilgrimages—all these have their place in telling the story of the "Bonhoeffer phenomenon." They are like ripple effects that flow ever farther from their common source. Haynes even writes about an evangelical theologian who has written an anti-Bonhoeffer book reminding staunchly conservative champions of Bonhoeffer that this man actually accepted historical criticism, studied with Harnack, and had nice things to say about Bultmann and Nietzsche.

Like Haynes's earlier work, which dealt with traditional Christian thinking about Jews and with biblical defenses of slavery, his book surveys a meaty theological subject without offering much in the way of constructive theology. It may remind you of the best religion teacher you ever had—the one who made clear the connections between seemingly disparate theological movements, who tied together the threads of an otherwise chaotic narrative. Haynes shows us why such radically different groups can use Bonhoeffer: because he was so good at coining phrases ("cheap grace"; "religionless Christianity") that can be spun off into endless, and often quite odd, variations. There are striking parallels between Bonhoeffer's life and traditional entries in *Lives of the Saints*—from his noteworthy upbringing to his stirring final words (which may have been fabricated, as so often happens with such *Lives*). He points to the ways Bonhoeffer's life offers us a sort of *imitatio Christi*. He refers to

Eberhard Bethge's work as an all-important source of hagiography. The description "saint" seems to fit.

Yet Haynes does express some discomfort with the term. One can make too easy an analogy between our current circumstances in America and Bonhoeffer's struggle with the Nazis. The indiscriminant critics of America and those who murder abortion doctors both reveal how poor use of political and historical analogy can be linked with obfuscating thought and lead to vicious action. Haynes fears that Bonhoeffer's de facto canonization leads to a domestication of his legacy—the plastic saint on the dashboard rather than the living voice calling us to lives of repentance.

In a subsequent book Haynes promises to tackle the complex problem of Bonhoeffer's writings about and relationship to the Jews, and the glimpses we get of Haynes's take on this issue show him even more reluctant to speak of Bonhoeffer in saintly terms.

Slane seeks to bring the stock description of a martyr and Bonhoeffer's life together by bending each toward the other. The church's beloved accounts of ancient martyrs heroically confessing the orthodox faith in the face of death, while stirring, describe conditions that no longer apply. Today's martyrs tend to be "disappeared," not paraded in front of stadiums. Bonhoeffer's own death was a direct result of his engagement with the world in ways that reflected his Christian faith, even if he himself feared he might have compromised that faith in helping to plan an assassination. He had speculated in 1932 that the blood of martyrs might flow again, only it would not be as guiltless and gleaming as that of the ancients.

Political responsibility today requires not pristine innocence but giving oneself away for the life of the world, even to the point of taking on guilt. Slane traces this sort of kenotic shape to Bonhoeffer's thought, especially through the middle part of his career, from the Christology lectures through the Finkenwalde seminary experiment and the writing of *Discipleship* and the *Ethics*. Slane proposes a martyrological lens through which to view Bonhoeffer's thought as a whole, so that we see his career not as one tragically cut short, but as one that led ineluctably to his death and takes its coherence from that telos. He shows that Bonhoeffer's life bears the incarnational pattern of God's engagement with the world: "Bonhoeffer is saying something to us, inviting us to consider, as it were, the life beneath his life, the death beneath his death, and the Logos beneath his logos."

Both these works shed new light on Bonhoeffer, one exploring the surprising effects of his work on subsequent readers who do quite unexpected things with it, the other offering a new focus meant to give his thought greater theological coherence. Each seeks to apply to him a venerable title. Yet the impressive resources the works marshal do not answer the basic question of how Protestant churches assign these titles. I suspect the best Bonhoefferian answer, to which these authors would assent, is in the kinds of lives that the reading of Bonhoeffer continues to produce. If Bonhoeffer's life and work continue to shape readers to offer saintly witness, we would not be wrong to call their patron the holiest of martyrs.