Why Bonhoeffer, Why Now? A Response to Stanley Hauerwas's "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology"[1]

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As a scholar of religion in North America (apparently not one of Bonhoeffer's favorite topics), I come at this paper not with the perspective of a theologian with intimate knowledge of the work of either Bonhoeffer or Hauerwas, but from the vantage point of a religious studies scholar who has explored questions of life history, narrative, gender, and religious identity through the methods of ethnography and history.

My comments come out of four related issues. The first is, What is it to be a political theologian? If, as Hauerwas suggests, Bonhoeffer was a political theologian because he wanted to "reclaim the visibility of the church as the necessary condition for the proclamation of the gospel in a world that no longer privileged Christianity"[2] — that is, he wanted Christian theology to speak out and act in the world — was he also a theologian who understood the politics of theologies? According to Hauerwas, Bonhoeffer insisted that to become the "visible" Church, the Church must renounce its invisible "Constantinian" privileges and rely only on Christ and the forgiveness of sins, thus making it, in Hauerwas's words, "a zone of truth in a world of mendacity."[3] This sharp dualism obscures multiplicity on both sides of the equation of church vs. world. However, I'm less concerned in this instance with the plethora of Christianities than with the other side of the dualism, in which a variety of theologies, and especially Judaism in the case of Bonhoeffer's time, are rendered invisible by the Church's visibility. If part of our exercise is to think about what Bonhoeffer's work offers to the twenty-first century, then it would seem that if visibility entails forgoing privilege (and I would contend that many, especially Euro-American, Christians still do enjoy this privilege in a global sense), it must also entail developing ways of being able to see and hear other theologies, be they Jewish, Muslim, or those of another religion.

My second comment stems from Hauerwas's description of Bonhoeffer's ambivalence towards or revulsion for the "religious." Ironically, in his suspicion of "religion" Bonhoeffer is not so far away from the Americans whose theology he found superficial.[4] That said, if Bonhoeffer's visible church or visible community does not take the form of "religion," what shape does it take? In his highly eschatological essay, "The Visible Community," he argues that the visible church must include the sacraments, the proclamation of the Word, and the embodied, daily lives of Christians: "When a man is baptized into the Body of Christ not only is his personal status as regards salvation changed, but also the relationships of daily life."[5] Despite his disdain for an overly individualized pietism, Bonhoeffer seems to counter his revulsion for the religious with a direct individual relationship with, in his words: "God and Christ; authenticity, life, freedom, and compassion mean a great deal to me. It is just their religious manifestations which are so unattractive."[6] If we think of religion in an albeit limited sense as rituals, institutions, theologies — various modes of not entirely consensual community consensus that necessarily stifle aspects of individual authenticity — how does faith take form in a community without religion?[7]

My third concern is the role of family in Bonhoeffer's life. I wonder if Hauerwas's dismissal of the Christianity of Bonhoeffer's family as "simply . . . part of the furniture upper-class Germans assumed came with their privileges" is not too quick.[8] Certainly, that many members of Bonhoeffer's family were involved in the German resistance together with him and the intensity with which Bonhoeffer wrote of his love for his family in his letters from prison suggest that his family may have played a large role both in his political development and as a set of relationships that shaped his identity as a Christian. As Bonhoeffer wrote from prison in May 1943: "Anyone for whom the parental home has become so much a part of himself as it has for me feels specially grateful for any message from home."[9] As Bonhoeffer himself makes clear in writing about the visible community, daily relationships — and these must include family ones — are a necessary sphere in which the deeds of a Christian are done. Perhaps, then, Bonhoeffer's notion of the intimately political nature of Christianity was not only the product of a great mind capable of "theological miracles"[10] (according to Barth) but also the work of an embodied son and brother whose experience of family and other human relationships informed

his political theology. Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, his strong biblically-based views on the complementary roles of wives and husbands in which "the wife is to be subject to her husband, and the husband is to love his wife"[11] were not actually based on his own embodied experiences of daily life with a wife.

So, for my final point: If we can see Bonhoeffer as a political theologian whose life and theology developed a "theological politics from which we still have much to learn,"[12] how is that learning happening? What kind of Bonhoeffer is being created today? Hauerwas, in an autobiographical introduction, discusses how it took until now for him to write about Bonhoeffer, because he found the uses to which Bonhoeffer was put so problematic — especially Harvey Cox's version in *The Secular City*.[13] What has changed since then, both for Hauerwas and for the wider reception of Bonhoeffer? How have the "fragments"[14] of Bonhoeffer's life (a notion I find very helpful) been put together in new ways? There are operas, plays, and poetry written with Bonhoeffer as their subject. There are attempts to have him honored at Yad Vashem as a Righteous Gentile, that, as far as I know, have still not met with success because he is not thought to have met the criterion of actually risking his life to save the lives of Jews. There are Bonhoeffer societies and Bonhoeffer statues, and the Bonhoeffer home page quotes Dorothee Soelle as saying that Bonhoeffer is "The one German theologian who will lead us into the third millennium."[15] Perhaps the fragments of Bonhoeffer's life play off each other in a way that helps to perpetuate his enigmatic appeal: the pacifist who would have killed Hitler; the Christian who hated religion; the political animal engaged in the world and dedicated to an eschatological revelation that would end the world; the scribe who disdained the foolish for their habit of talking in (to be anachronistic) soundbites, while being himself eminently quotable.

The politics in Bonhoeffer's theology requires a great deal of critique, especially in terms of gender and relations between religious traditions. However, I must also say that I found this opportunity to reread him to provide some solace in a world that seems once again to be escalating to a different kind of apocalypse of its own making, as evidenced by an American president on the front page of the newspaper declaring that the "nuclear option" is still "on the table." With that president in mind, I would draw attention to one last

quotation from Bonhoeffer, this one on folly:

> The fact that the fool is often stubborn must not mislead us into thinking that he is independent. One feels in fact, when talking to him, that one is dealing, not with the man himself, but with slogans, catchwords, and the like, which have taken hold of him. He is under a spell, he is blinded, his very nature is being misused and exploited. Having thus become a passive instrument, the fool will be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. Here lies the danger of a diabolical exploitation that can do irreparable damage to human beings. . . .[16]

The questions that remain are, What sort of liberation do we as human beings require to overcome the folly of today? and What does Bonhoeffer offer to this struggle?

Notes

[1] I thank James Reimer and the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre for inviting me to respond to Stanley Hauerwas's paper, and I also thank Hauerwas for his thoughts on my comments.
[2] Stanley Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology," 12.
[3] *Ibid*., 27.
[4] *Ibid*., 22.
[5] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1959), 231.
[6] Bonhoeffer, quoted in Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology."
[7] For a very helpful discussion of "religion" as both a scholarly construct and an historical force, see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993).
[8] Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology," 20.
[9] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Enlarged edition. Ed. Eberhard Bethge. (New York: Collier, 1971), 38.
[10] Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology," 21, note 16.
[11] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 43.
[12] Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Political Theology," 17.
[13] *Ibid*., 18, note 8.
[14] *Ibid*., 19.
[15] For more on the range of tributes to Bonhoeffer, see www.dbonhoeffer.org.
[16] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9.