

Mark Thiessen Nation, Anthony G. Siegrist, Daniel P. Umbrell. *Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.

In this provocative and highly engaging book, Nation, Siegrist, and Umbrell argue that the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been tainted by unfounded assumptions surrounding the nature of his involvement in the conspiracy against the Nazis. This has resulted in the common misperception that by the end of his life Bonhoeffer had departed from his earlier ethics of radical discipleship for a more “realistic” view of the world that recognized the necessity of employing violence in the name of the greater good. The authors seek to combat this myth, and to recover his call to peacemaking through reconsidering his biography (Part 1) and tracing the development of his theological ethics (Part 2).

The pivotal third chapter of the biographical section sets out specifically to disprove the myth of Bonhoeffer the assassin. Bonhoeffer, the authors assert, did not join the *Abwehr* (the German military intelligence) in order to become involved in assassination plots but because it provided a way for him as a conscientious objector to avoid military induction and to continue his theological work (76). Further, it must be recalled that Bonhoeffer was arrested on account of his role in helping fourteen Jews escape from Germany into Switzerland (86). Finally, Bonhoeffer’s execution should not be interpreted as evidence of his involvement in assassination plots but as the last gasps of a vengeful Nazi regime seeking to eliminate all its enemies (87). The authors conclude there is no evidence that Bonhoeffer either affirmed or was “involved” in the plots to kill Hitler (93).

Part 2 consists of close readings of Bonhoeffer’s treatment of theological ethics from three distinct periods in his life. His first foray into theological ethics in 1928 is characterized by a formalistic conception of God’s freedom that renders it difficult to speak of ethics at all. For the authors, this lecture represents a false start that is overcome with Bonhoeffer’s breakthrough of the early 1930s, which culminated in *Discipleship* (105). In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer moves beyond his earlier formalistic account of ethics by making a substantive turn to the person of Jesus Christ, resulting in a concrete ethics of radical discipleship.

The *Ethics* manuscripts that follow in the 1940s represent neither a break nor a departure from the Christological vision of *Discipleship*; rather they are “its confirmation, as it is its continuation, amendment, clarification, and culmination” (158). The close reading of the *Ethics* manuscripts that follows decisively refutes those inclined to read *Ethics* as signalling a shift towards something resembling Niebuhrian “realism”. For Bonhoeffer, to speak of “reality” apart from Jesus Christ is simply an abstraction.

While the first part of *Bonhoeffer the Assassin?* should encourage the reader to re-evaluate the extent and nature of Bonhoeffer’s involvement in the conspiracy, the authors’ biographical conclusions run up hard against the testimony of Bonhoeffer’s close friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge. Bethge depicts Bonhoeffer not only as being aware of but as offering his approval of the assassination attempts.¹ There is some engagement with Bethge’s testimony, but on the whole the reader is left searching for an explanation as to how Bethge could have been so confused or misled about such a fundamental detail in his friend’s life.

There is a distinct danger that the revisionary biographical conclusions of the first part of the book could prejudice readers against fully engaging with the very important theological argument advanced in the second part, which is capable of standing on its own terms. The absence of explicit discussion about Bonhoeffer’s challenging statements in *Ethics* about extraordinary situations, or borderline cases, that require transgressing of the law for the sake of its sanctification is an obvious lacuna in what is otherwise a very commendable treatment of the development of Bonhoeffer’s theological ethics.²

Bonhoeffer the Assassin? is both an important contribution to the field of Bonhoeffer studies and a gift to help the church in identifying and narrating the lives of the saints. It deserves to be widely read and debated.

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¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., edited by Victoria A. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 751-52.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 273, 297.