



Reading Bonhoeffer: A Map to the Literature

JAMES H. BURTNESSE

Luther-Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

This map is not designed to entice people to start reading Bonhoeffer, but to assist those who for whatever reason are already on the way. Nevertheless, it may be appropriate to begin by offering a few words of counsel to the person with some interest but no experience.

The place to begin is *Costly Grace: An Illustrated Introduction to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).¹ This short paperback contains, in addition to the tightly-packed text, numerous illustrations and a chronological table aligning events of Bonhoeffer's life with important political and ecclesiastical events. It is all here, clear and crisp, by the one who knew and knows Bonhoeffer best. With this material in hand, the reader will be prepared to sample some of the primary literature. Historical contexts should be kept clearly in mind as one proceeds through the following: the first ("Community") and the last ("Confession") chapters of *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); the introductory essays prior to the exposition of Matthew 5-7 in *The Cost of Discipleship* (2nd ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1959); the section in the *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) labeled "Christ, Reality and Good"; the material in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1967) beginning with the letter of April 30, 1944. How then, assuming this, should one proceed?

I. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliography is the first place to go because there is no better way to get the lay of the land, some notion of well-traveled roads, detours, blind alleys, express routes, than to unfold the whole map for at least a quick overview. There is fortu-

¹The identical volume is published in England with the title *Bonhoeffer: An Illustrated Introduction in Documents and Photographs* (London: Collins, 1979). There are additional books which bear different titles in England than in the United States, and there are in some cases more than one title for the same book even in the United States. The first edition of the prison letters, for instance, was called *Prisoner for God*. Because of space limitations, only materials in English are mentioned here, and only the most recent American title is given. One should be aware that major pieces of primary literature are continually appearing in new editions, so the publishing data is constantly changing. What is given here is current at the time of writing.

nately a single best way to do that. It is to acquire a duplicated copy from a theological library of the thirty-three page bibliography by Clifford J. Green in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (hereafter *USQR*) 31 (1976) 227-60. Green's opening paragraphs should be read carefully. The piece was a kind of "interim report" on the English-language materials for the International Bonhoeffer Bibliography, a project which has been underway since 1969 and is currently a high priority item for the International Bonhoeffer Society. Regular supplements to the Green bibliography have been and continue to be published in the *Newsletter* of the English Language

Section of the society. Readers can thus be relatively certain that they have all the English-language materials if they have checked the Green article and back copies (to 1976) of the *Newsletter*.²

II. BIOGRAPHY

It is usually helpful in understanding the work of a person to know something about that person's life. In the case of Bonhoeffer that connection is absolutely essential and for at least four reasons. First, there is the shortness of Bonhoeffer's life (39 years) and the fragmentary character of much of his writing. Second, there is the coincidence of Bonhoeffer's career with the Nazi dictatorship. He began teaching at the University of Berlin in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power, and was executed in 1945, the year that Germany was defeated and Hitler committed suicide. To abstract Bonhoeffer's "ideas" from that context is to risk gross misunderstanding. Third, he was one of those people who said what he did and did what he said, so that his life is a commentary on his writings, and his writings on his life. Fourth, the question of sharp changes (turns, shifts) or continual development (growth, maturation) arises as soon as one begins to read him. It is one of the major points of controversy among Bonhoeffer interpreters, and it is only by working through the connections between biography and theology that some independent (even if tentative) judgment on this important matter can be made.

It has already been stated that the short illustrated introduction by Eberhard Bethge is the first book that a newcomer to Bonhoeffer should read. It can now be added that the large biography by Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), is the *sine qua non* of serious Bonhoeffer study. It can be skimmed, read in sections according to one's interests and needs, or enjoyed as a single extended delight. It is, one does not hesitate saying, a masterpiece. The 867 pages are carefully designed, well organized, and clearly written to lead the reader through the intricacies not only of Bonhoeffer's life and work, but also of the times in which he struggled. It is available in paperback. It should be purchased and used as a basic reference point, a place to which to return whenever the way gets a bit confusing.

There are, of course, other places to go, and time and interest will determine the frequency and extent of such explorations. Two biographies that served to introduce the Bonhoeffer story prior to the translation of the Bethge volume into English are *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by William Kuhns (Dayton: Pflaum, 1967) and *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Mary Bosanquet (New York:

²Information about the *Newsletter* can be obtained from Dr. Geoffrey Kelly, LaSalle College, Philadelphia, PA 19141.

Harper & Row, 1969). Since there is no possibility of reporting without interpreting, each of these authors (as well as all others mentioned here, including Eberhard Bethge) has a point of view which shows up in the handling of the data. The point of reading these two now might only be that independent critical judgment on the part of the reader develops as different points of view are carefully examined.

Not to be missed is *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences by His Friends*, edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). The book contains 39 slice-of-life sketches in six chronological sections. Also of interest is a volume

by one of Dietrich's sisters, which opens the doors of the Bonhoeffer household, Sabine Liebholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: A Portrait of a Family* (New York: St. Martin's, 1971). Friendship and family are major themes in Bonhoeffer's writings. These two volumes help those themes come alive.

The life is so powerful as story that it should be no surprise that creative artists have been attracted to it. The first of this genre was Elizabeth Berryhill's *The Cup of Trembling: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Seabury, 1958). A study guide to the play, by Donald Stauffer, is available from the same publisher. Another play entitled *Coming of Age* by Wilfrid Harrison (Trotten, England: Fernhurst, 1973) has been produced in England for a decade. Both pieces are suitable for chancel dramas and can be done with a minimum of stage properties. Trinity Films of Minneapolis has been engaged for several years in a major "Bonhoeffer Project" which will finally include a documentary film suitable for TV or classroom use, a stage play, and a major feature-length film. Readers should be on the lookout for the appearance of a novel currently being written by Mary Glasner after several years of research. A number of church windows in Germany are dedicated to Bonhoeffer. At the Grunewald Guild in Leavenworth, Washington, artist Richard Caemerrer, Jr., has depicted in a double stained-glass window Bonhoeffer's rejection of "two-sphere thinking."

Two fictional treatments for skimming only are *Memo for a Movie: A Short Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Theodore A. Gill (New York: Macmillan, 1971); and *The Last Days of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Donald Goddard (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

A relatively new experiment in theology that seems to be growing into a movement attempts to be historically accurate and hermeneutically clear about the interpenetration of biography and theology. Various phrases ("psychohistory," "theology as biography," "theology as autobiography," "faith-development theory") are used to signal this approach which has roots in Erik Erikson and others who have stressed the factor of development in psychoanalytic theory. Bonhoeffer is an obvious candidate for such treatment and important questions about continuity and change in his life are now being sorted out through these new grids. Three examples of this approach are "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Religionless Christianity—Maturity, Transcendence, and Freedom" by Roger A. Johnson in *Critical Issues in Modern Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973) edited by Roger A. Johnson; "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness in an Ambiguous World" by Robin Lovin and Jonathan P. Gosser in *Trajectories in Faith* by James W. Fowler, Robin W. Lovin, and others (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), and "Bonhoeffer in the Context of Erikson's Luther Study" by Clifford Green in *Psy-*

chohistory and Religion. The Case of 'Young Man Luther,' edited by Roger A. Johnson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Every interpreter must somehow face the issue of the relationship of biography and theology. The very great dangers of universalizing a particular theory of psychosocial development and then pressing the data into the categories of that theory, however, should be kept in mind as one reads the results of this kind of research.

III. PRIMARY LITERATURE

Readers should be aware that various editions and translations of Bonhoeffer's writings do differ from one another in significant and sometimes aggravating ways. There is a complicated story behind the publishing of almost every document. Some sensitivity to those stories can be developed by careful attention to prefaces and forewords, particularly those by

Eberhard Bethge. Further insights into publishing and translating difficulties can be gained from Bethge's article, "The Editing and Publishing of the Bonhoeffer Papers," *The Andover Newton Bulletin* 52 (December, 1959) 1-24; from John Godsey's "Reading Bonhoeffer in English Translation: Some Difficulties," *USQR* 23 (1967) 79-90, reprinted in *Bonhoeffer in a World Come of Age* edited by Peter Vorkink II (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); and from John Deschner's "Bonhoeffer Studies in English," *Perkins School of Theology Journal* 22 (Spring, 1969) 60-68. Corrections and improvements have been in general cumulative, so that as a rule later editions are to be preferred to earlier ones. The brief comments offered here presuppose some basic awareness of the documents themselves and of the place of each in the Bonhoeffer story.

Bonhoeffer's first two books, *The Communion of Saints* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) and *Act and Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), were university dissertations. These most academic of his writings detail philosophical and theological (as well as sociological and psychological!) foundations for his later reflections.

Christ the Center (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) is a reconstruction from student notes of Bonhoeffer's 1933 university lectures on Christology. Since Jesus Christ is indeed at the center of Bonhoeffer's life and work (so much so that some accuse him of "Christomonism"), the importance of these lectures cannot be over-emphasized. Earlier and later writings come into sharper focus as one pursues his argument that the real Christological questions are "who" and "where," rather than "how."

Bonhoeffer was a systematic theologian who knew very well, as did Barth (and Luther and Calvin) that if theology is going to be *Christian* theology, it must be done in constant conversation with biblical texts. When one examines the entire *corpus* of Bonhoeffer's writings, the amount of straightforward biblical exposition is astonishing. Even the number of books devoted to specific biblical texts may be surprising. *Creation and Fall* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), another reconstruction from student notes of 1933 university lectures, and *Temptation* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), a series of Bible studies given to Finkenwalde alumni in June of 1938, are now published in a single paperback. The first is an exposition of Genesis 1-3, the second a comparison of the biblical stories of the temptation of Adam and the temptation of Christ. Both presuppose careful exegetical work (and there is evidence that it was in fact done), but the result of that work comes

to the reader in theological, sometimes homiletical, lyrical, even rhapsodic, form. Another treatment of Old Testament texts is *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), in which it is argued that Christians can pray the Psalms because Jesus prayed them. It is said, in fact, that the Psalms are a way in which Jesus *teaches* his disciples, and us, to pray. The Christological exposition of Old Testament texts may seem a bit heavy-handed until one becomes aware of what some "German Christians" were doing to separate the New Testament from what some of them referred to as "the Old Testament with its Jewish money morality, livestock handlers, and pimps." Even Bonhoeffer's neighbor and family friend Adolf von Harnack regarded the twentieth-century retention of the Old Testament as Christian scripture as highly questionable. The best treatment of Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the Old Testament is *The Old Testament as The Book of Christ: An Appraisal of Bonhoeffer's Interpretation* by Martin Kuske (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

The two most widely read and best known books by Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of*

Discipleship and Life Together, come from the period of his work with the Confessing Church seminary at Finkenwalde. He was convinced that the Sermon on the Mount should be a regular part of the theological curriculum, and the first volume is a result of his work on this text with his students. He was also convinced that theological education should foster Christian community, and the second book is a result of his efforts toward that end. Later he wrote about the “dangers” of the first book, but indicated he would still “stand by” it (letter of 21 July, 1944). Readers of the second book should bear in mind that in his foreword (unfortunately omitted from the English edition) Bonhoeffer says that the study “should not be considered as more than just one contribution” to the question. Both books are widely and effectively used for group study in congregations.

The two books of the “last period” of his life are books only because Eberhard Bethge brought the materials together and published them. *Ethics* was originally published in Germany in 1949 and *Letters and Papers from Prison* (hereafter *LPP*; enlarged ed., New York: Macmillan, 1971) in 1951. The *Ethics* is a compilation of four attempts by Bonhoeffer to begin to draft such a book. *LPP* is exactly what that title describes. One need only read the essay entitled “What is Meant by ‘Telling the Truth?’” in the *Ethics*, or to read the letter of April 30, 1944, in the *LPP* to realize that there are some very unusual things going on here. When one keeps in mind that the radicality of Bonhoeffer’s reflection arises directly from the radical claim that God and world come together in Jesus Christ, it all takes on greater clarity and greater significance.

Three volumes of additional Bonhoeffer materials have been edited by Edwin H. Robertson under the titles *No Rusty Swords*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), *The Way to Freedom*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), and *True Patriotism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). These materials have been selected from the six-volume *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter *GS*), edited by Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Kaiser, 1955-74). In addition to many translation and editing flaws, a major problem with the Robertson volumes is that it is virtually impossible to locate documents in them. A lecture or letter from the *GS* referred to in the biography, for instance, may or may not be translated and included in one of the Robertson volumes, but there is no proper index enabling one to locate it quickly or even to determine whether it is there at all. Fortunately, there is a “Correlation table”

constructed by Clifford Green and included in the *USQR* bibliography which does solve the problem. Only a few of the sermons (located primarily in *GS* 4 and 5) are now translated. His homiletics lectures from Finkenwalde, however, are included in *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* by Clyde E. Fant (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975). They can be read with profit even apart from any specific interest in Bonhoeffer.

A new translation of prison attempts (1943) to draft a play and a novel has just been brought out under the title *Fiction from Prison* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). Bonhoeffer had no interest in excessive introspection and deplored the public exhibition of personal feelings. Through this device, however, without violating the sense for “distance” that was so much a part of his aristocratic reserve, Bonhoeffer allows the reader some intimate insights. The decoding of the frequently autobiographical references in these sketches is facilitated by the introductions by Renate and Eberhard Bethge and by Clifford Green, along with the commentary by Ruth Zemer.

Other primary materials in English are scattered about here and there. “Thy Kingdom Come: The Prayer of the Church for God’s Kingdom on Earth” is included in *Preface to*

Bonhoeffer by John D. Godsey (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965). In 1967 Maria von Wedemeyer-Weller, Bonhoeffer's fiancée, published a few excerpts from his letters to her in an article "The Other Letters from Prison" which appeared first in *USQR* 23 (1967) 23-29. The article is now included in the Enlarged (Fourth) Edition of *LPP*. The excerpts serve to underline Bonhoeffer's massive affirmation of the earth and of physical life in the context of confidence about the future. The actual letters to Maria are not available at the present.

IV. SECONDARY LITERATURE

The best short statement on the entire complex unity of the Bonhoeffer legacy is still Eberhard Bethge's 1961 Alden-Tuthill Lectures delivered at Chicago Theological Seminary entitled, "The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life and Theology," and published in *World Come of Age*, edited by R. Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967). That volume also contains articles on Bonhoeffer by Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Regin Preter, and others. A second very useful short statement is *The Promise of Bonhoeffer* by Benjamin A. Reist (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969). Either one of these is an excellent place to begin exploring secondary literature. After that, where does one go?

There are about a dozen one-author, single-volume major treatments in English of Bonhoeffer's theology. At or near the top of anyone's list as soon as it appears from Fortress will have to be H. Martin Rumscheidt's translation of *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* by Ernst Feil (Munich: Kaiser, 1971). It is an extremely careful and thorough presentation of the unity of Bonhoeffer's theology seen as an interplay of hermeneutics and Christology and understanding of the world. Feil will be the most recent in English. The earliest was John Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). In *Christ for Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) John Phillips attempts to show that Christology is the key to both unity and development in Bonhoeffer, a "secular Christ" receiving more attention than an "ecclesiastical Christ" as Bonhoeffer moves toward the "Christology of the prison letters." An-

dré Dumas, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), emphasizes the unity and continuity of Bonhoeffer's life and work around the theme of reality. It is a solid statement that reads very smoothly. The theme of James Woelfel's interpretation is clear in his title *Bonhoeffer's Theology, Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970). One of its continuing values is a series of sketches of relationships with others, e.g., Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Barth, and Bultmann. One of the most careful treatments, surely the best available on the "early" Bonhoeffer, is Clifford Green's *Bonhoeffer: The Sociality of Christ and Humanity* (Missoula: Scholars, 1972). Two more volumes emphasizing the "reality" theme appeared in 1972, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* by Larry L. Rasmussen (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), and *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Heinrich Ott (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972). Rasmussen is still the only book-length treatment of Bonhoeffer's ethics; Ott's is a "dialogue" rather than a comprehensive interpretation. He says that the book is not primarily "about" Bonhoeffer, but "with him about his subject." David H. Hopper, in *A Dissent on Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), argues that personal and existential concerns probably outweigh those that are primarily systematic in Bonhoeffer's writings, but that it may be his final statement of rather traditional Christian faith that is the most significant and most lasting.

Some of the valuable material on Bonhoeffer is located in journal articles and in shorter pieces in book-length collections. A few such references have already been made. A glance at the Green bibliography will indicate the scope of this literature. There is room for only a few additional references.

Recently published is *A Bonhoeffer Legacy: Essays in Understanding*, edited by A. J. Klassen (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981). Following the introduction by Eberhard Bethge there are 19 essays, all by people who have done doctoral dissertations on Bonhoeffer. An important article dealing with Bonhoeffer's handling of baptism is by Glenn Borreson, "Bonhoeffer on Baptism: Discipline for the Sake of the Gospel," *Word & World* 1 (1981) 20-31. "As Though God Were Not Given: Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the *Finitum Capax Infiniti*" by James H. Burtness, *dialog* 19 (1980) 249-255, is an attempt to understand Bonhoeffer in terms of connections to Luther and to Barth. Papers are read and discussed at annual meetings of the English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society, as they are at occasional international gatherings of the society, and many of these find their way into the journals and into book-length collections. A recent agreement between the society and the Edwin Mellen Press of Lewiston, New York, will facilitate publication of such research. Several volumes are already projected. The first in the series has been released under the title *Ethical Responsibility*. Those interested in archival materials will find them in the Bonhoeffer Archives at Union Theological Seminary, New York, and in West Germany.³

Any selection of "tertiary literature" would include items dealing with the Church Struggle Under Hitler, with the Holocaust, with the liberation of oppressed peoples. A starting point in each case could be *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches 1935-45* by J. S. Conway (New York: Basic Books, 1968); *The German*

³The addresses, respectively, are: Bonhoeffer Archives, Union Theological Seminary, 3041 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, and Bundesarchiv, Am Wollershof 12, 5400 Koblenz 1, Federal Republic of Germany.

Church Struggle and the Holocaust, edited by Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1974); and Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr* (New York: Seabury, 1975). The last volume is a series of lectures delivered by Bethge in South Africa at the invitation of the South African Council of Churches. It also contains a piece entitled "Bonhoeffer in South Africa: An Exploratory Essay" by John de Gruchy of the University of Capetown.

The journey continues. It is clear that the importance of Bonhoeffer for the faith and life of the church cannot be reduced to the hagiography of martyrdom or to the novelty of clever phrases. There are many who think that the exploration of Bonhoeffer's contribution has just begun. When one looks at the many routes by which one can travel with him, one is inclined to agree.

Bonhoeffer also learned from Dohnányi that war was imminent and was particularly troubled by the prospect of being conscripted. As a committed pacifist opposed to the Nazi regime, he could never swear an oath to Hitler and fight in his army, though not to do so was potentially a capital offense. He worried also about consequences his refusing military service could have for the Confessing Church, as it was a move that would be frowned upon by most Christians and their churches at the time.[23]. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God." [39]. Reading Bonhoeffer offers a running commentary of each segment of these popular texts along with discussion questions suitable for the university and seminary classroom as well as for parish adult education programs using these two books. In the final section of the book, Dr Kelly has excerpted and analysed three significant texts by Bonhoeffer on the need for world peace against the rising militarism and continued glorification of war in Germany and other European nations. eISBN: 978-0-227-90341-4. Subjects: Religion. Literature-MapDietrich Bonhoeffer. ? What else do readers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer read? The closer two writers are, the more likely someone will like both of them. Click on any name to travel along. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Peter Rollins Karl Barth Brian McLaren Eric Metaxas Francis Chan Ann Lamott Martin Luther Jürgen Moltmann Leonard Sweet Marcus Borg Robert Preus Wilfrid Stinnsen Miroslav Volf Erwin Mcmanus Thomas Merton Tim Keller Paul Tillich Henri Nouwen Augustine Of Hippo Brennan Manning Nt Wright John Stott Ken Boa Hermann Sasse Alan Hirsch Boethius Doug Pagitt Alexander Shaia Frank Schaeff