DOHNÁNYI, Hans
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*A life that meshed with the rise and fall of Nazism*

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer

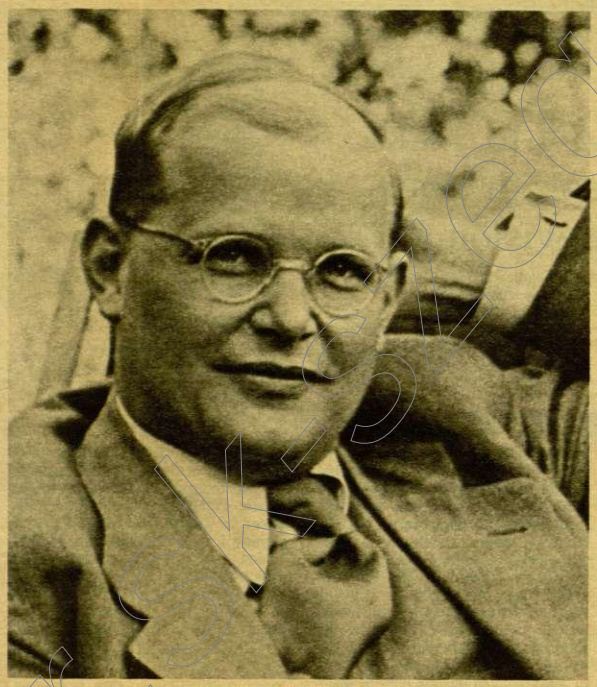
*Man of Vision, Man of Courage. By Eberhard Bethge. Translated from the German by Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, William Glen-Doepel. Under the editorship of Edwin Robertson. Illustrated. 867 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $17.95.*

By JOHN MACQUARRIE

"Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds." So wrote the camp doctor who witnessed the death at the hands of the Nazis of 39-year-old German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on April 9, 1945.

Many theologians have had large books written about their thought and speculations. Here, however, on the 25th anniversary of its subject's death, we have a massive volume devoted to a theologian's life. The author, Eberhard Bethge, was Bonhoeffer's friend and student; he married Bonhoeffer's niece and edited the theologian's famous volume, "Letters and Papers From Prison." For years Bethge has devoted himself to the preparation of this essential, well-documented biography. If the life of the average theologian is uneventful, this was far from the case with Bonhoeffer, and his enduring significance is better explored in a biography than in an analysis of his theology.

When the young Bonhoeffer announced his intention of studying theology, his father, who was professor of psychiatry in the University of Berlin and himself an agnostic, was disappointed. Later he wrote to Dietrich: "At the time when you decided to devote yourself to theology I sometimes thought to myself that a quiet, uneventful minister's life would really almost be a pity for you. So far as uneventfulness is concerned, I was greatly mistaken. That such a crisis should still be possible in the ecclesiastical field seemed to me with my scientific background out of the question." These words come from a letter written as early as 1934, and neither father nor son knew then that more than a decade of still more eventful and severe crises lay ahead.



*Dietrich Bonhoeffer c. 1940.*

It was Bonhoeffer's fate that his life intermeshed with the century's most fascinating episode — the rise and fall of Nazism. To be sure, it is the fascination of horror. It provokes to this day the great question and enigma of our time—a question not without its theological dimension. How was it possible for this monstrosity to emerge at the center of European civilization? We see in this biography the young Bonhoeffer's promising career diverted by the rise of National Socialism. He is increasingly engulfed by it, and eventually destroyed.

Yet it would be a superficial understanding of Bonhoeffer that considered him simply as a man caught in the events of his time, like a fly in a spider's web. He himself understood his career as the continually deepening response to a vocation that finally demanded everything he had. The best-known of his books published in his lifetime was "The Cost of Discipleship," and perhaps the word "discipleship" is the key to his theology.

What does it mean to be a disciple? Whereas his Lutheran training had stressed "grace alone" as that which makes the disciple, Bonhoeffer shifted the emphasis to obedience. He made a famous distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace is nominal Christianity, grace "sold on the market," "thrown away at cut prices," to quote Bonhoeffer's biting words. Costly grace is obedient discipleship, and he understood this particularly as obedience to the Sermon on the Mount.

In the concrete, as Bethge makes clear, this theological problem of obedient discipleship became for Bonhoeffer the agonizing question of the Christian's obligation to participate in political realities. He might have remained an academic theologian, as did many others; and then he might have survived, as they did. It was not simply an external fate that overtook Bonhoeffer. He was following an ideal of discipleship.

If there is a constant thread that holds his life story together, it is the thread that leads from his early political disinterestedness to his final implication in a political conspiracy. Rightly or wrongly, this was how his understanding of discipleship unfolded. And clearly his dilemma has a continuing relevance beyond the circumstances of Nazi Germany.

Bonhoeffer was a most unlikely candidate for the role he came to fulfill. In appearance, he was round-faced, bespectacled, mild. Yet his physique was powerful, and he must have had a tremendous supply of energy to maintain the activities of his busy life.

Dietrich and his twin sister were the sixth and seventh of eight children. If their upbringing in the last years of imperial Germany was strict, it was also secure. Their parents never had less than five domestics to help run the household. They always kept a summer place, where the children spent many happy weeks. Musical evenings were another feature of family life. One of the older brothers was killed in World War I; but on the whole, life was secure, and the young Bonhoeffer sometimes felt guilty about it. "I should like to lead an unsheltered life for once," he confided to his youngest sister. "We cannot understand the others."

No doubt when Bonhoeffer first turned to theology he expected that life would continue to be secure, like that of some of his relatives who were pastors. His theological studies were chiefly at Berlin, where the faculty was one of the finest in the world and prided itself on "scientific" theology. But soon he felt himself drawn to a man who in those days was revolutionizing theology and had emerged as a sharp critic of the pundits of Berlin—Karl Barth. Later, Barth was to take a leading part in the struggle of the church against Hitler. He became one of the great influences in Bonhoeffer's life and a loyal friend, even if the two men did not always agree.

Bonhoeffer was a student at Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1930-31. Here he made lasting friendships, but the American experience brought a new challenge to Bonhoeffer's conception of theology. Although he tended to despise what he found at Union because the intellectual dimension of theology seemed sacrificed in the interests of social activism (it was the time of the Depression), his year there helped him to discover that German academic theology was equally one-sided, though in a different way.

For on his return to Germany he soon learned that theology cannot be pursued in quiet isolation. Christianity in Germany was facing its greatest challenge, and this became acute after Hitler came to power in 1933. Many churchmen conformed to the new regime, but Bonhoeffer and Barth were among those from several religious traditions who resisted.

The young man who had criticized the activism of American Christianity now became deeply involved in the ecclesiastical and civil politics of Germany. A change was taking place in his understanding of both discipleship and theology. He even began to question the omnicompetence of German theology. "It seems inconceivable," he wrote, "that in the whole of the world just Germany, and in Germany just a few men, have understood what the Gospel is."

These were incredibly busy years in Bonhoef- *(Continued on Page 30)*

**Mr. Macquarrie,** who has taught theology at the University of Glasgow and the Union Theological Seminary, has recently been appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford. His most recent book is "Three Issues in Ethics."

fer's life. He taught theology, first in the university, then in an unofficial seminary and finally, when that was closed by the Gestapo, in a clandestine "underground" seminary. He was ever active in the struggle within the church and between the church and the Nazis. He became a well-known figure in the ecumenical movement and international conferences that led to the formation of the World Council of Churches.

Two important friendships date from these years. One was with Bethge, who joined Bonhoeffer's seminary in 1935 and became a faithful companion. Though himself arresed, he was able to preserve for publication some of Bonhoeffer's manuscripts, including the famous letters from prison. The other friendship was with Bishop G. K. A. Bell of Chichester, an English leader of the ecumenical movement. Bell was greatly impressed by Bonhoeffer, and both then and later used his influence to help the resistance to Hitler.

It was in 1939 that Bonhoeffer made the most crucial decision of his life. It was apparent that war was inevitable. Some of his friends tried to persuade him to seek security in the United States, and he was offered various positions. He did in fact come to New York at the beginning of June and taught in the summer session at Union Seminary. But by the end of July he was back in Germany.

He wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr: "I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people."

Till now, his resistance to the regime had been nonviolent—he was, incidentally, a great admirer of Gandhi. But he was aware that there were others, some of them in high positions in the armed forces, who believed differently. His own brother-in-law, civil servant Hans von Dohnanyi, was one of this revolutionary group. These men believed that only the assassination of Hitler and the violent seizure of power could save Germany from destruction. As early as 1940, Bonhoeffer came to share the view that Hitler must be eliminated.

From now on Bonhoeffer was

living what Bethge calls a "double life"—churchman and conspiratorial agent. Under the auspices of disaffected elements in the military security service, he made several journeys abroad to establish contacts on behalf of the conspirators. In 1942 he was in Stockholm conferring with his old friend Bishop Bell, who tried unsuccessfully to convince the British Government to take the conspirators seriously as a means of ending the war.

But things went badly with the conspiracy. Time and again, the plans miscarried. In 1943, Bonhoeffer, Dohnanyi and some others were arrested. Shortly before, Bonhoeffer had become engaged to the 18-year-old Maria von Wedemeyer—a surprising step in view of the almost monastic existence that he established in his seminary.

Greater surprises were to come. In the two years that he spent in jail, he wrote down in letters and fragmentary essays his thoughts on Christianity as these had developed. This man of faith was now advocating a "worldly" theology. To be sure, this has often been misunderstood.

He wrote: "I don't mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection." For him, "worldly" Christianity meant the fullest participation in the world and for the world, but in the strength of an inner discipline of prayer. Surely in his death he carried that ideal to its fulfillment.

There has been a tendency to overrate Bonhoeffer as a theologian. His work is too fragmentary for him to stand in the first rank in that respect. But it would be impossible to overrate his importance as a disciple—and not least because he was willing to accept the moral ambiguity of the last phase of his activity. Mr. Bethge has created a memorable portrait of a great Christian and moral leader of this century. ■