

# Bonhoeffer, “German Christians,” and American National Religion

Colleagues,

Preface (a tad long) “Terror Threat Remains, Bush says.” That was Wednesday’s newspaper headline here in St. Louis as we approach the fifth anniversary of the World Trade Center inferno. But in those five years the US president seems not to have learned much about the source of the terror. Yet he should. Not because he’s got the CIA working for him. But because he professes to be an evangelical born-again Christian. It’s in his Bible too. The Bible tells who the Ultimate Terrorist is that people and nations MUST face—and why that threat, to use Bush’s term, REMAINS.

“Terror” appears 40 times in the old KJV of the OT, only three times in the KJV of the NT. The NRSV has reduced terror. Only one of the three in the NT remains [Rom. 13:3]. Of the OT’s forty, 33 are still there. The author of the terror is finally (gulp!) God. Here are some samples.

*Lv 26:16 I will bring terror on you.*

*Jer. 15:8 I have made terror fall upon Jerusalem.*

*Job 6:4 The terrors of God are arrayed against me. [Four diff. Hebrew vocables are translated “terror” in Job.]*

*Gen. 35:5 Terror from God fell upon the cities.*

*Ez. 32:32 I spread terror in the land of the living.*

*Jer. 32:21 You brought your people out of Egypt . . . with great terror.*

*Jer. 17:17 O LORD, do not become a terror to me.*

*Is. 10:33. The LORD . . . will lop the boughs with terror; the*

*tallest ones will be cut down.*

*Job 31:23 I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced his majesty.*

Given that last statement out of Job's mouth, I wish they would have let stand one more of the excised 2 terror passages in the NT. It's 2 Cor. 5:11. The old KJV has St. Paul saying "Knowing the terror of the Lord, we therefore . . . ." Paul had in the previous verse just said that we all "MUST appear" before the judge on judgment day "so that each may receive recompense . . . whether good or evil." The place where it is appropriate to be terror-stricken is when standing before THIS Judge, "facing HIS Majesty," as Job said. Paul is remembering those OT terror-texts as he composes this sentence to the Corinthians. When the NRSV gives us "knowing the fear of the Lord," it's much too tame for what Paul clearly wants us to hear. Standing before this judge is terrifying. Even more important, unless you "know" the terror of the Lord, you'll miss the good news coming just a few sentences later. Namely, this Good News: When you are standing before The Bench, but are now "in Christ," this Judge "does NOT count trespasses." Such acclaimed Good News is ho-hum if you don't "know" that you're standing before the Judge, that all life transpires "coram deo," vis-a-vis with God—in short, if you don't "know" the terror of the Lord. It's that simple.

The Biblical witness doesn't fudge. When terror comes upon us, God's at the other end of it. No matter which creaturely agent he's using to bring it to us. And that's what Bush has not seen for lo, these past five years. But then he speaks for all Americans, even if we didn't vote for him. The masses haven't seen it either. Nor is anyone giving voice to it in other branches of government. Even worse, much worse, that's also true in the Christian churches. Blind, not benign, neglect. There is no wall of separation in America on this one. In both church and

state the blind lead the blind.

But it's in the Bible, Bush's Bible too. And you don't even have to go to the "Hebrew scriptures" to find it. It's patent in the NT—even in an NRSV with terror "reduced" and "fear" favored over the term "terror." Just take Luke, for instance, 12:4&5. Right out of Jesus' mouth: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" And who, pray tell, has that sort of authority? The divine majesty who induced Job's terror.

What might you say to that judge when he confronts you with his terror? Again Jesus in Luke's next chapter (13:5). When towers fall and slaughter abounds "I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Repentance has become somewhat of a broken record, a one-string banjo, in ThTh postings since OUR towers fell five years ago. I didn't invent the proposal. It comes on much better authority. But there's blessed little evidence that the visually impaired national leaders, along with the general populace, along with church leaders, see the connection between Bush's "Terror Threat Remains" and the Bible's "Terror of God" message. Thus they also don't hear—they see no need to hear—Jesus' "I tell you, unless you repent . . . ." Here's the Biblical axiom: until repentance comes, terror does remain. And then the obverse: when repentance does come, terror no longer remains.

But you've heard this before on this channel.

So for the fifth anniversary, another voice—much less shrill than mine, but not at all namby-pamby.

It is the voice of H. Gaylon Barker, a major voice among

Bonhoeffer scholars today. Gaylon is parish pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Stamford, Connecticut, Adjunct Prof at Molloy College (Rockville Center NY), board member of the International Bonhoeffer Society and editor for the English language edition of Bonhoeffer's works. He was one of the keynote speakers at the July Bonhoeffer conference in St. Louis. His paper was titled: "Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle."

Here's his own condensed version of what he said there: "During the 1930s German Church Struggle Bonhoeffer fought to protect the integrity of the church's proclamation from the outside influences of Nazi ideology. Drawing on Luther's theologia crucis, Bonhoeffer clearly distinguished between the true church of Jesus Christ—which takes its life from sola scriptura, solus Christus—and the heretical teachings of the German Christians, who had compromised the church's very existence by wedding Nazi ideology to Christ."

At the end of his conference presentation Barker signalled some parallels between the "German Christianity" of DB's day and the "Folk Religion of God Bless America" [FROGBA] in our times. But he didn't elaborate. So I asked him to do just that for a future ThTh posting. He said yes. Here it is.

Peace and Joy,  
Ed Schroeder.

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## ***WHAT WE BELIEVE – MATTERS!***

*What we believe—matters! What we believe matters because it shapes our understanding of the world as well as influences our life and actions in the world. If the 9/11 hijackers who flew*

the airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, for example, had not believed what they believed, would they have done what they did? Even if we think their actions were depraved, were they not the result of their faith—a distorted faith, to be sure—but faith nevertheless? And simply because their actions were the result of a misguided or falsely conceived faith does not mean we should dismiss it as an aberration. It needs to be taken seriously—and it needs to be responded to. By the same token, the faith of the 9/11 attackers is not the only example of an ill-conceived use of religious faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century Lutheran theologian, was convinced that “what we believe matters,” not only in terms of our church faith and practice but also in relation to our lives in the world. But he was not alone. Luther, too, whose *theologia crucis* [=theology of the cross] was the greatest influence on Bonhoeffer’s thinking, found proper belief of such importance that he spelled it out clearly in his explanation to the first commandment in his Large Catechism, which for him was the foundational commandment upon which all the others rested: “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol...For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.” Anything in which we place our faith is our god; likewise, any ideology, not just those limited to religion, can become idolatrous and lead us away from God.

Such an acknowledgment points out that not all expressions of religious faith are necessarily healthy or helpful—nor should they all be accepted at face value. As a matter of fact, such a

statement acknowledges the need to discern the true God from all false gods, a true, saving faith from all misguided faiths.

The Confessing Church Struggle in 1930s Germany is one example of such a struggle over the nature of faith and our understanding of God. When Hitler came to power in January 1933, the churches of Germany were confronted with a crisis. On the one hand, many in the church throughout Germany welcomed Hitler's promises of national and moral renewal and the return to traditional values. As a result, they were willing to overlook his inflamed rhetoric, believing it would either pass or could not be taken seriously. On the other hand, there were those who perceived danger ahead for the church that came with any compromise made with Hitler and the Nazi state. Members of the Confessing Church believed that the German Christians, by lending their support to Hitler and integrating Christianity and National Socialism into a racially pure "people's church," were distorting the Gospel. For those in the Confessing Church, the German Christians had accommodated themselves to the political winds of the day and, as a result, had watered down or in some cases even altered the biblical message.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a leader in the Confessing Church movement from its inception. In place of the German Christian's "positive" Christianity, Bonhoeffer's theological agenda in the 1930s was meant to free the church from the false gods of nationalism and its implicit racism. He saw the Nazi confession of "blood, race, and soil" threatening the church's very life. As he stated at the time, "The question is really whether Germanism or Christianity," "either National Socialism or Christ."

His theology, which follows a continuous trajectory, is a response to that. Drawing on Luther's *theologia crucis*, he was able to offer a clearly articulated critique of National

*Socialism and the church from a scripturally-informed perspective. But in addition, his words stand as a corrective to any theology that seeks to find a point of contact between the Church's proclamation of the Gospel and any pseudo-religious nationalistic claims.*

*For example, as a co-writer of the 1933 draft of the Bethel Confession, Bonhoeffer offers a clear alternative to the theology of the German Christians. At its heart, the confession affirms the classic Christian teaching about Jesus: He is the "Son of God and Son of David, true God and true man;" he is "the end and fulfillment of the law," without whom the world would be lost under the wrath of God. He is "through the unbelief and for the sake of all people crucified" (DBW 12: 384). Therefore, Bonhoeffer insists that the church reject all false claims that seek to present Jesus in a "nordic fashion" or his cross as a "general symbol of religiosity or human truth" or "anything whatever." In response to the German Christians who sought to present Jesus as a "nordic type," Bonhoeffer stresses the Jewishness of Jesus. And rather than accepting the widespread assumption that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, Bonhoeffer, by stressing Jesus' own Jewishness, preferring to call him the "Son of David," concentrates on the sinfulness of all humankind, implicating not the Jews but all people in the death of Jesus. In contrast to any attempt to equate Christ's cross with general religious sentiments, Bonhoeffer says Jesus is the Son of God and Son of David "sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and his cross is the "unique revelation of God" that brings reconciliation with God.*

*Three years later, in a 1936 letter to his brother-in-law Rudiger Schleicher, Bonhoeffer writes what is both a confession of faith and summary of his theology. He says:*

"I know about the God for whom I am searching either out of my own experiences and understanding, from my own interpretation of history or nature, that is, from within myself—or I know about that God on the basis of God's revelation of God's own word. Either I determine the place where I want to find God, or I let God determine the place where God wants to be found. If it is I who says where God is to be found, then I will always find a God there who in some manner corresponds to me, is pleasing to me, who is commensurate with my own nature. But if it is God who says where God is to be found, then it will probably be a place that is not at all commensurate with my own nature and that does not please me at all. This place, however, is the cross of Jesus....It is not at all a place that we find pleasant or that might be a priori clear, but a place alien to us in every way, a place utterly repugnant to us. But precisely that is the place at which God chose to encounter us." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 14 [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming], 146)

Bonhoeffer's theology is an expression of the *theologia crucis* in that everything we know about God we know in and through Jesus Christ. And the key to understanding Jesus Christ for us lies in the cross. At the cross all human schemes and plans are brought to naught. No longer can it be assumed that we can work our way to God. The cross is a clear indictment that we can no longer even try. What is quite clear in the cross is that this is God's way to us. If we want to find God, we must go to where God has chosen to place himself. By contrast, religion in America, from conservative to liberal, evangelical to mainline protestant, is quite often based on a god of our own choosing, one who affirms us, and one who promotes triumphalism both in the church and society. Such a faith is by-and-large a *theologia gloriae* [=theology of glory. Luther's term for the



opposite of theology of the cross], shaped more by a god that reflects ourselves than by the God revealed in scripture. Unfortunately, far too often the god we invoke is usually that of a god who mirrors our values, affirms our positions, and justifies our actions. The problem with such a religion is the assumption that God is on our side, that God confirms us in our goodness.

In many respects, much of what passes for religion in America today is the extension of the marketplace; we preach what sells, we give people what they want. What better security can the government provide than to wed religious language to the political agenda, for it certainly can lead to a "God is on our side" mentality and that we are doing the right thing. It lends justification to our form of violence, giving us the ammunition to perpetuate injustices in the name of national interest, which happens to be good for the world as well. The problems we are facing have nothing to do with us. The problem is out there, coming from others who are threatening our "God-given" way of life. Perhaps when political leaders enlist God to bless America or insist that God is on our side, they are referring to a god of their own choosing.

So it is that while many praise the return of religion in both the public and private spheres, Bonhoeffer provides a word of warning: not everything that passes as religion is equally the same—nor is it all good. In the same way that Nazi ideology worked its way into the language of the church and was embraced by the church because of its pledge to restore traditional values, today's religious language, both in the church and in society, can just as easily be promoting a false god. Religion, when falsely interpreted, can be a harmful element in society. When religion is informed by factors other than scripture, it can lead to idolatry—worshiping a god of one's own creation.

*Granted, 21st century America is not Nazi Germany. At the same time, however, we should be alarmed when we witness the welcome admixture of patriotism and religious fervor, all meant to support America's vision of the world. We have infused a wide stream of images and ideas into our concept of the Christian faith, some of which have no real foundation in the tradition, but are popular conceptions imposed on it. Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, engages modern culture, but does not want to relinquish the agenda to the world. He wants to keep it in the hands of God.*

*And so Bonhoeffer rejected both the claims of the German Christians and the Nazi leadership because they proclaimed a different Christ, the idea of a Christ who restores the fortunes and glory of the Reich; at the same time, he did not retreat into pietistic individualism, in which Christ is seen as the source of happiness and security. In their place, Bonhoeffer clung to and proclaimed only the biblical Christ, who came into the world in weakness and who was rejected, suffered and died for the sake of the world. This was not to leave the world as it was, but to call into question all human aspirations, which in our modern world are a part of our fallen humanity, to stand in the place of God.*

*The public square indeed is not naked, but it is not necessarily Christian either. There is a virtual smorgasbord of religious choices available to any discerning believer, so that one is bound to find a religion or God of one's own liking. As Christianity competes with other religions for people's faith, many of these beliefs are filtering into the Christian worldview; if this continues, the face of Christianity will be changed. In such a context, Bonhoeffer's argument proves helpful. Be it by Nazi ideology or secular religiosity, new elements can be inserted into the church's message that will eventually change the Gospel. By drawing a clear distinction*

between Christianity and religion, Bonhoeffer notes that real differences exist between religious claims and, therefore, we cannot simply pick-and-choose the elements we want. To do so creates a religion of our own liking, and one that is no longer Christian. In a context where nearly one quarter of American Christians believe in reincarnation, the Christian message is threatened today as much as it was by Nazi ideology yesterday.

Perhaps we get a glimpse of Bonhoeffer's theology addressing the American context in Eberhard Bethge's reflections on his own experience in America. Eberhard Bethge recalls a surprising experience of visiting Jerry Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, VA, in the early 1980s. He says that Falwell, in his sermon, indicated that they were doing battle with secular humanism and all the other godless forces at work in America. This was what he had expected to hear, so that was not surprising. The surprise came as they were leaving; an usher approached him and handed him two badges for his lapel. One was a cross that had "Jesus First" emblazoned on it; the other was an American flag. In recalling this experience, Bethge said:

"I could not help but think of myself in Germany in 1933. That was exactly what we believed for some time in German terms: on the one hand our nation's proud renewal, to which we wanted to devote our energy and time, and to make sacrifices, if need be; on the other hand, to Jesus Christ at the same time. Why not that relation and that equation? Then I remembered that slow and bitter revelation how in the interpretation, even in that 'Jesus First,' the flag in fact became the guiding force. Of course, Christ, but a German Christ; of course 'Jesus First,' but an American Jesus! And so to the long history of faith and of its executors another chapter is being added of a mixed image of Christ... " (Eberhard Bethge, "A Visit to Thomas Road Church," *The Wild*

Goose (1:2), July, 1990, 15-16).

For him, the message could not have been more clear. From his experience of Germany in the 1930s and '40s, whenever the cross and the flag are put together, the flag always wins. History has taught us that there is a real danger in wedding religious faith to any political ideology or cause. Inevitably religion will end up being used to validate one's political stance or somehow or other be placed in the service of the emperor rather than speaking God's word, which is both law and gospel. And when that happens, the church easily sacrifices speaking God's word; it becomes difficult for the church to be a critical voice.

As I reflect on the use of Bonhoeffer's theology to address contemporary America, I cannot help but be drawn to Luther's own stating of the problem in the 16th century: "a theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." (LW 31, 53). If there is a theological statement that speaks directly to our context, this may surely be it.

While we cannot claim to know what Bonhoeffer would say today, as a student of Martin Luther, we know that he would be honest and "call the thing what it actually is." He would not refrain from speaking out when nationalism is portrayed as faith or wedded to religious beliefs. He would not compromise on "Christ alone" as the foundation and center of our faith—and would not shy away from pointing to those preaching some admixture of "Gospel and...." as proclaiming a different Gospel. He would do that because what we believe matters.

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