

EARLY INFLUENCES ON AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF FAITH AND ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

by David Specht

For in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together.

Paul of Tarsus

While science helps calculate the odds on a decision, belief sustains one in the inevitable uncertainties and anxieties which the originator of regenerative action must bear. A theology of institutions could be a vital ingredient in forming and shaping a faith which empowers such risk-taking and institution building; it could also be a critical resource in the development, preparation and sustenance of persons who are committed to being regenerative agents within institutions.¹

Robert Greenleaf

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Early Influences on an Exploration of the Intersection of Faith and Organizational Life is the first in a series of three essays reviewing the history of an inquiry into the relationship of Christian faith to organizational life. This inquiry has found expression through a variety of project and action-research efforts spanning nearly 50 years, and whose roots certainly extend even further back in time. This essay explores those early roots of the present work, focusing on the decades of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

A second essay, *Trustees of the Universe: Recovering the Whole Ministry of the People of God* by Richard Broholm, examines the shape of this inquiry through the 1960's, 70's and into the early 1980's.

A third, currently in the planning stages, will trace the development of this inquiry from the mid-1980s to the present.

David Specht

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Overview

This reflection is the first in a series of several essays reviewing the history of an inquiry into the relationship of Christian faith to organizational life. The series attempts to identify persons and ideas and experiences which have shaped our effort to explore this lively intersection, and in so doing to mark our trail, offer appropriate tribute, and become more fully conscious about the development our own ideas and perspective.

While there are many places such a reflection might begin, we will take as our starting place the events and influences which emerged from the period of years during and immediately following World War II, beginning with the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. More immediately, however, we begin with the assumption that every story has a story-teller whose own story will, for better and for worse, shape their telling.

Coming Clean

Introduction by Way of Self Disclosure

In retrospect, among the many courses I took as a student at Andover Newton Theological School, one of the more influential was a course taught by Dan Novotny on "Biography and Theology." I was drawn to it both by the warm and respectful way Dan engaged his students and by the course's essential premise that in every instance both our theological questions and convictions are powerfully shaped by our lived experiences. When it comes to our theological perspective, what we see has a great deal to do with where we stand. While the reasonableness of this assertion may today appear self-evident, as a young seminarian the fundamental truth and logical implications of this statement resonated in a way that nearly took my breath away.

On one hand, the notion that our theological beliefs are intimately tied to our life journeys helped me to become far more comfortable with my own journey as one whose convictions about the nature of God and God's relationship to both me and the world are constantly evolving as I seek to make sense of those beliefs in light of my changing understanding of both myself and the world around me. My experience of faith had never been one of immutable and unshakable belief in rigidly defined orthodoxies, but rather as the capacity to trust in the existence and purposes of God's love while remaining alive to mystery. Becoming more comfortably at home with this was in and of itself a significant gift, in that it allowed me to settle in more honestly and openly with my own journey as a believer and seeker.

This alone would have warranted my appreciation for the course, but there was also an important corollary to my own quite personal resonance to this premise. Namely, that the theologians and biblical scholars and ethicists whose texts we read and whose convictions we more or less engaged were, just like us, speaking and writing as persons whose own perspectives and beliefs and questions were powerfully shaped by their own life circumstances and experiences. By spending time with biographical material on the

theologians whose texts we studied, it became clear that in reading their words, rather than encountering sanitized records of disembodied and neutrally reported truths we were instead engaging the best attempts of men and women to make sense of Divine Mystery in light of their own very personal encounters with life and with one another's ideas.

This perspective was not inconsistent with the liberal Protestant tradition in which I had grown up, a tradition which in its mainstream posited neither scriptural inerrancy nor rigid theological infallibility. It was helpful, nevertheless, in a couple of important ways. One was that it made even less troubling the nagging problem of how to regard the somewhat dismaying experience of significant theological voices fundamentally disagreeing with one another about important questions of faith. The other was that in addition to normalizing the differences as a function, at least in part, of biography, it also offered an important hermeneutical key for helping to make sense of any given theological perspective. Namely, the life, times and cultural and personal concerns of the author whose perspectives you are engaging. Becoming familiar with this is, of course, made somewhat easier when the author elects to be self-revealing about essential experiences and related preoccupations which shape their perspectives and writing.

So it is that my own effort to write about our exploration of the intersection of faith and organizational life begins with a history of the events and ideas which have focused our attention, framed our questions, and shaped our emerging clarities. In seeking to be thoughtfully explicit about what it is that has shaped our inquiry, our hope is to offer appropriate acknowledgment to those who have shaped our thinking while at the same time making the logic of our inquiry and conclusions a little more transparent to others of you who may be drawn to similar explorations now and in the future. We also trust that it will help to expose the limitations of our own particular inquiry, in a way that will prove helpful to colleagues known and unknown to us whose own inquiries will, we hope, extend and deepen our quest to see truly and relevantly into the lively relationship of faith and organizational life.

Before moving into a discussion of the influences on our thinking, I will begin with a brief and hopefully relevant word of self-disclosure that may be helpful to the reader in making sense of the "why" behind both how we've focused our attention and the conclusions that we've drawn from our inquiry. I grew up in a family of sturdy New England Congregationalists, with parents whose own faith had strong ethical dimensions expressed through discipline and moderation in personal affairs, concern for those in need, and a predisposition to regard the struggles and failings of others through the eyes of compassion. As a high school senior in the early 70s I gave relatively little thought to the possible implications of registering for the draft as the war in Vietnam struggled to wind down. By the time I completed my undergraduate studies in psychology and philosophy at the University of Maine, however, I had developed a strong predilection toward suspicion and mostly passive disapproval toward the policies and actions of our government at home and abroad. My generally cynical regard toward large institutions was related in some combination to an awareness of their capacity for evil, to my secret unwillingness to entertain the possibility that they might be doing some good, and my mostly unconscious resentment about the extent to which I was largely dependent on entities that I was at that point unprepared to respect.

My own habit of moral discernment was curiously inconsistent, combining

my parents' commitment to regard the failings of others through the beneficent eyes of forgiveness and compassion while at the same time I was quite ruthless in my sifting into unambiguous categories of good and evil the institutions of commerce and government. When it came to individual persons, I was inclined to give folks the benefit of the doubt. However, when it came to institutions, particularly large institutions, I was almost reflexively and ideologically pessimistic about their possibilities. In a 1968 address at Cornell University, John Gardner framed the tension facing organizations and their leaders during that time as being between those (usually on the inside of the organization) who were blindly loyal and entirely complacent about the need for change and those (usually on the outside) who were relentlessly and indiscriminately critical. He described this as the battle between the "uncritical lovers" and the "unloving critics,"² and could have reasonably invited me to pose as the poster child for the latter.

Toward the end of my time in seminary, I had become deeply involved in the movement to oppose our government's policies toward Central America. Through Witness for Peace, I spent time in war zone in Nicaragua, eventually coming to live there for a time with my family. I became enamored with liberation theology with its emphases on the biblical themes of freedom from oppression and a concern for the poor. I mostly shrugged off the concerns of friends who ventured to wonder what the implications of such a "preferential option for the poor" might be for those who weren't. My family and I became residential members of a Catholic Worker farm, a lay religious community where we housed homeless men and women and grew food for soup kitchens and feeding programs. I continued to be active in opposing aspects of our nation's foreign policy, and occasionally found myself in jail as a result.

The circles I was traveling in were increasingly monolithic in their theological and political perspective and strident in their rhetoric, but privately I was beginning to wrestle with doubts about the adequacy of such a narrow perspective. For one thing, I was troubled by the tendency of a faith-based peace movement to champion prayer for enemies on one hand and exhort the fundamental dignity and worth of every individual regardless of their status on the other while at the same time lashing out publicly and personally at our political adversaries in ways that failed to recognize and honor the image of God within them also. I was worried about what felt like a lack of humility on our part and our inability to self-critique.

Moreover, I had begun to work for the Center for the Ministry of the Laity at Andover Newton, where I found myself face-to-face on a regular basis with lay people who worked as leaders within some of the very institutions that I had so comfortably dismissed as irrelevant (apart from being problematic) to the purposes of God's love in the world. As a group, these were some of the finest men and women with whom I have had the privilege to work. In coming to know and appreciate them, I was unsettled to discover that in significant ways the moral compass by which they oriented themselves to the world was very similar to my own. The most significant difference was their willingness to locate their vocational center of gravity inside of large organizations where they sought to work for transformation from within while I had tended to remain self-consciously and self-righteously outside. I quickly came to respect these friends for their willingness to work for change amidst oftentimes-conspicuous imperfection and moral complexity and for their intentionality in seeking to be faithful in the exercise of the power associated with their own roles and their organization.

Blessing and brokenness, good and evil, exist in both persons and organizations not as mutually exclusive possibilities, but as simultaneous inevitabilities.

I recall in particular a conversation during that time with a friend named Stu who worked as a manager for a large high tech manufacturing firm which had for many years been renowned for offering its people a covenant of lifetime employment. His company was now in the midst of a significant downturn due to problems around product release and poorly anticipating the direction of the market and was facing the painfully public and highly controversial process of issuing its first-ever layoff notices.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“Terrible,” he responded shaking his head. “Morale’s incredibly low. I feel like we’ve betrayed a sacred principle.”

“Are you thinking of leaving?” I wondered.

Stu looked up sharply and replied, “No, not at all. Why?”

“You said that the company violated one of its sacred principles,” I answered.

“Actually I said that *we* violated one of *our* sacred principles. I’m pretty frustrated and ashamed that this is happening, and I believe that it could have been avoided, but I haven’t thought of leaving. I’ve been proud to be a part of our organization until now, but I’ve never been under the illusion that we’re perfect. Any more than I am under the illusion that I’m perfect. Or you. None of us are and we never will be. We’re going to mess up. So we had better learn how to walk with one another as imperfect beings. If we’re always ready to bail out on each other, I figure it’s going to turn out to be a pretty lonely journey.

“I don’t expect our organization to be perfect either, although right now I’m super aware that when an organization like ours fails, a lot of people can get badly hurt. It certainly seems possible to me that someday I might decide that it’s time for a change. But at this point I feel committed to seeing if we can get out of this mess we’ve gotten ourselves into. Ask me again a year from now,” he smiled.

I realized that in talking with Stu I was speaking with one of the “loving critics” and “critical lovers” for whom Gardner had called in his address.

Later my training and professional work as a mediator would help me to become increasingly comfortable in working with ambiguity, complexity, and the extent to which our point of view (what we see and what we think and feel about what we see) has everything to do with our viewing point (where we are standing). And it will not surprise anyone that as I began to find myself in significant decision-making roles within the organizations where I have worked and served, I have had to make my peace with the reality that even our most carefully and best-made decisions are imperfect and reliably have consequences, some anticipated and others unintended, that are a mixture of blessing and brokenness.

Although it would still be awhile before I was to discover in Walter Wink’s writings on the Powers and Principalities³ theological language that helped me to claim this truth more explicitly from the perspective of my faith, I had already become entirely clear that blessing and brokenness, good and evil, exist in both persons and organizations not as mutually exclusive possibilities, but as simultaneous inevitabilities. Coming home to this truth made it impossible for me to any longer regard and engage institutions as an “unloving critic”.

I would like to imagine that I have successfully navigated the journey into which John Gardner invites anyone who is committed to engaging organizations: the movement from the tendencies of both “unloving criticism” and

“uncritical loving” to the more supple and demanding discipline of “critical loving”. However, there continue to be moments, now and again, when I find myself moving out of the former.

It is my hope, nonetheless, that this writing will reflect a serious and respectful engagement of the questions surrounding the role and purposes of organizations in God’s world, and how we as people of faith might best work (and at times struggle) within and through them in order that they might serve the purposes of love and contribute to the common good. Anything less would not adequately reflect deep respect for those who have been my principle guides on this journey—the women and men who minister to and through organizations not because they believe that these institutions are always or even usually faithful, but because they understand that they are God’s.

A Brief Word About Words

Any exploration of the intersection of faith, work and organizational life will inevitably spend time sorting out its vocabulary and dealing with issues related to language.⁴ We certainly have, as these writings will attest. The questions here are many and important: Is language that is not explicitly religious capable of adequately bearing sacred truth in settings where those who are engaging come from many religious traditions and none at all, and where religious language is, for some very good reasons, taboo? If the language we employ in the settings of our employment is not explicitly religious, how can we be certain that we are connecting to the deepest clarities and truths of our faith tradition? Are there ways of drawing upon the various religious and spiritual traditions that are present in our organizations as sources of wisdom not only for our personal edification but also as a relevant resource to the difficult decision-making which we face in our organizations?

These and many other questions related to language deserve our attention. At this point, however, I wish to offer only two brief words, one a clarification of definition and the other an acknowledgement of the particular faith perspective which has shaped this work. First the definition. While there are several definitions associated with the term *institution*, here we use the word interchangeably with the term *organization* to refer to any enterprise in which people, processes, and resources have been organized to serve purposes that may be social, political, educational, religious or economic in nature.⁵

Finally, while we have over the years of our inquiry understood ourselves to be participating in an increasingly broad conversation about the intersection of faith, spirituality, work and organizational life that is taking place within and among many diverse religious and spiritual traditions in our culture, we understand also that our own participation in this exploration is from a very particular perspective from within the Christian tradition (mainstream Protestantism). While we understand that this faith tradition is by no means the only starting place from which to enter into this conversation, it is ours. So, trusting our good friend Jack Fortin’s⁶ assertion that “what goes deepest to the heart goes widest to the world,” we will speak with confidence and humility from that perspective. ■

¹ “The Need for a Theology of Institutions” by Robert K. Greenleaf. This essay is published as part of a collection of Greenleaf’s writings entitled *Seeker and Servant* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass , 1996) ed. Larry Spears, 191-198.

² This concept from the address by John Gardner was cited on page 48 of *Strategy of Hope: Lay Ministry for Organizational Change*, 1972.

Written by the staff of Metropolitan Associates of Philadelphia, this manual offers a conceptual framework and process proposal for lay people seeking to work together around the goal of organizational transformation.

³ Walter Wink’s trilogy of writings on the Powers (*Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers*, and *Engaging the Powers*) have been immensely helpful in shaping our theological understanding of organizational life.

⁴ For a thoughtful exploration of some of the language issues related to faith, work and organizational life, see *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* by Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

⁵ It is perhaps interesting to note that another definition of institution relates to “the establishment of a sacrament.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition*. (William Collins & World Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), 730.

⁶ Jack Fortin, in addition to being my friend, is the Director of Luther Seminary’s Center for Lifelong Learning and its program “Centered Life~Centered Work. He also serves as Chair of the board of Seeing Things Whole.

These Powers are the necessary social structures of human life, and it is not a matter of indifference to God that they exist. God made them. For this reason ... the account of creation in Genesis does not end in chapter 2, with the creation of the world, but in chapter 10, with the creation of the nations.

Walter Wink

The Inextricable Link Between Persons and Institutions

While we tend to think of the emergence of institutions as a relatively recent phenomenon in human history, our existence has been bound up with institutions for a very long time indeed. Following a rather alarming set back, in its later stages the creation story found in 10th chapter of Genesis finds God playing the role of post-flood recovery/turn-around specialist in seeking to revive viable human communities through the descendants of Noah. The text suggests the indispensability of institutions for human existence in describing a genealogy not of persons alone, but of nations as well. It ends with this summary: "These are the families of Noah's sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood."

"The meaning is clear," observes Walter Wink. "Humanity is not possible apart from its social institutions."²

When it comes to understanding organizations from the perspective of our faith, however, the church has been somewhat developmentally delayed, offering to its people a highly personalized theology focusing on God's relationship to individuals but remaining largely silent about the nature and purpose of organizations. Robert Greenleaf, a student of organizational life and author on the theme of servant leadership, was not himself a religious person in any explicit or conspicuous sense, but nevertheless addressed himself to this gap when he wrote:

*"I do not believe that the urgently needed fundamental reconstruction of our vast and pervasive structure of institutions can take place, prudently and effectively, without a strong supporting influence from the churches. And I doubt that churches, as they now stand, with only a theology of persons to guide them, can wield the needed influence. I deem it imperative that a new and compelling theology of institutions comes into being. It is my hope that contemporary churches will take the lead to produce it."*³

Greenleaf was not alone in calling for the church to speak a clearer word about the relationship of Christian faith to organizational life and performance. Around the same time, a church leader by the name of Jitsuo Morikawa wrote:

*"The church has commendably focused its theological discipline upon the welfare of individual persons, throughout most of its long history, as a sign of the preciousness of every life in the sight of God. Therefore, the ministry of the church is concerned with and practiced as largely a ministry to persons. But today, more than in the past, the fate or welfare of human life is powerfully affected by the institutions of society; in fact, the future is being largely shaped by these economic, political and social institutions of our culture, so that the role of institutions, the moral and social accountability of institutions, becomes perhaps the number one agenda in our historical enterprise. How to confront these powerful organizations, which are our greatest achievement, before they destroy us, on the one hand, and how to evoke and provoke them to a fresh discovery and discernment of their true purpose and calling, on the other hand, is the task of an American, indigenous, evocative theology"*⁴

For those of us who were working at the Andover Newton's Center for the Ministry of the Laity at that time, the words of Greenleaf and Morikawa

While science helps calculate the odds on a decision, belief sustains one in the inevitable uncertainties and anxieties which the originator of regenerative action must bear. A theology of institutions could be a vital ingredient in forming and shaping a faith which empowers such risk-taking and institution building; it could also be a critical resource in the development, preparation and sustenance of persons who are committed to being regenerative agents within institutions.¹
Robert Greenleaf

resonated compellingly for several reasons. In part I am sure that it appealed to us because the call for institutional change had a prophetic feel that tapped into the passion for social transformation which many of us shared. Most importantly, however, was that in our Center's work of exploring with laity their workplace ministries, the institutional dimension of the challenges which they faced in their various organizational settings came again and again to the foreground. Through these conversations it became increasingly clear to us that we needed to runderstand ministry in ways that went beyond the merely personal and interpersonal to include a recognition that organizations also were not only the context but also the agents of ministry, and that we had better begin to wrestle with how best to engage these institutions in light of this recognition.

Soon after, under the leadership of Dick Broholm and Ernie Sutcliffe the Center established a Theology of Institutions Task Force involving organizational leaders and theological faculty from Andover Newton. That work began a more formal journey over the past 17 years in which we have sifted both our experience and our tradition for clues about how we might better understand and engage this lively and high stakes intersection of faith and organizational life. The influences shaping our exploration are many and undoubtedly there are some of which we continue to remain unaware. For our purposes here, however, an important place to begin is with significant influences which emerged from the horror of the rise and fall of Germany's Third Reich.

Immediately following the end of World War II, several initiatives emerged which sought to meaningfully respond to the spiritual and moral chaos resulting from the failure of Christian persons and institutions to interrupt the tragic momentums which swept the European continent and impacted the world. Our starting place, however, will be with the life and thinking of a German Christian who did not remain safely on the sidelines during these terrible years, a Lutheran pastor and theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. ■

¹ “The Need for a Theology of Institutions” by Robert K. Greenleaf. This essay is published as part of a collection of Greenleaf’s writings entitled *Seeker and Servant* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass , 1996) ed. Larry Spears, 191-198.

² Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 66. In his own footnote, Wink credits this important insight to Hebrew Scripture scholar Gerhard von Rad. 66.

³ “The Need for a Theology of Institutions” by Robert K. Greenleaf. This essay is published as part of a collection of Greenleaf’s writings entitled *Seeker and Servant* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass , 1996) ed. Larry Spears, 191-198.

⁴ This quote is drawn from an unpublished address presented by Morikawa at the Laity Consultation at Andover Newton Theological School in 1985. It appears also in an article by Richard Broholm entitled *Trustees of the Universe: Recovering the Whole Ministry of the People of God*. (Shelburne Falls, MA: Seeing Things Whole, 2001), 12-13.

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the 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.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer's Costly Discipleship and Reflections on the Intersection of Faith and Life in the World

The life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer represents a relevant and compelling starting place for our exploration for several reasons. Foremost among them, undoubtedly, was Bonhoeffer's costly clarity about the necessity for Christians to involve themselves in the pain of the world. Moreover, his response to the troubles of his time focused not only responding to the needs of individual persons, but also involved struggling with both secular and religious institutions. Finally, in wrestling with what it meant for him as a Christian to become involved in the political opposition to Hitler, Bonhoeffer offers us important clues about how to work with the problem of religious language and its relationship to worldly discipleship. Before exploring any of these contributions, however, we begin with a brief recollection of Bonhoeffer's life story during that critical 15 year period beginning in 1930 until his death in 1945.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Germany during the years of the rise of Hitler's Nazi Reich. As early as 1933, he began to write and speak publicly of concerns about the power of the Fuhrer and the rising racism, and in September of that year began to work with Martini Niemoller on the creation of the "Pastors' Emergency League," drafting a pledge to oppose the accommodation of the German Church to such policies. This, in turn, set in motion the process of establishing the Confessing Church which became the center of German Christian opposition to the Reich.

Following a year in England, during which he did a great deal to cultivate the sympathies of the wider ecumenical community on behalf of the Confessing Church, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to assume responsibility for directing Finkenwalde, one of the Confessing Church's underground seminaries.¹ The Finkenwalde community, under Bonhoeffer's guidance, made up a radical element within the Confessing Church, frequently pressing the larger communion to take greater risk in speaking publicly on behalf of Jews and the cause of peace. Much to his dismay, the Confessing Church exercised what Bonhoeffer felt to be excessive and self-protective caution about this, remaining silent on many occasions when Bonhoeffer felt it imperative to speak clearly.

Meanwhile, the National Church worked with the government to isolate and erode support for the Confessing Church through implementing a complex series of laws which severely restricted the ability of the Confessing Church to legally finance its work and train its pastors, and eventually culminating in laws which greatly restricted the freedom of expression through written and spoken word, including preaching. By late 1937, it became increasingly dangerous for the Confessing Church to operate in the open. Niemoller was arrested, Finkenwalde was closed by the S.S., and by year's end 27 former seminarians were under arrest. At this point, Bonhoeffer published *Cost of Discipleship*, an exploration of the demands of faithful discipleship implied by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Further responding to this crisis, Bonhoeffer helped to reorganize the training of pastors for the Confessing Church into "collective pastorates" in which several seminarians lived in community with one another while sharing responsibility for the pastoral duties in a particular town. During

this time, when the crackdown on the world of the Underground Seminaries had forced a dispersion of Bonhoeffer's students, he completed his writing of *Life Together*, with its detailed instructions about an arcane (or secret) discipline of spiritual and communal practices to be observed when Christians were able to gather in order to sustain them for faithful discipleship in the world.

By this time Germany was moving toward war and young men, including most of the Finkenwalde seminarians, were being drafted. By the end of the war, many of them would have been killed in fighting at the front. It was 1939 and Bonhoeffer, at the urging of family and friends both at home and abroad, left Germany for the United States. This was a time of intense anguish for him, as he wrestled with what God was calling him to. While his work had been almost exclusively focused on the church struggle, increasingly he was feeling compelled to enter into resistance of a more political nature, convinced that it was necessary to find some way to stop Hitler. He spent little more than a month in New York, most of that time feeling desperately homesick and separated from the struggles of those he loved.

Much to the shock of his American friends who were busy making the necessary arrangements of employment for an extended stay by Dietrich in the United States, Bonhoeffer decided to return to his homeland. In a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, he explained:

*"I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the 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."*²

Once Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin, events unfolded quickly. He moved to involve himself in the circle of resistance. He had been informed of their work for some time, but now he began to involve himself in their circle, casting his lot with them. In March of 1940, the Gestapo closed the collective pastorates. By September of that year, Bonhoeffer had been forbidden to speak in public and was under orders to report regularly to the police. By March of 1941, he was forbidden to print or publish, and in October of that same year the first deportation of Jews from Berlin took place. During this year and the next, Bonhoeffer made several trips abroad, including three visits to Switzerland. Throughout these visits, he operated as a double agent, being sent by the Abwehr (the German Military Intelligence Department), but using the occasion to cultivate contacts that would be useful in enabling Germany to negotiate peace following the planned overthrow of Hitler.

In March of 1943 two assassination attempts were made on Hitler's life, both of them failing. Two weeks later, on April 5th, Bonhoeffer was arrested and his home searched. He spent the next two years in Nazi prisons. During this time he carried out extensive correspondence, much of it published in the well known *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It was also during this prison time that he undertook the majority of his writing on the subject of religionless Christianity.

On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Gestapo at Hitler's personal order along with several of his coconspirators at Flossenburg, a few days before it was liberated by Allied troops and 21 days before Hitler took his own life.



In what way, are we religionless-secular Christians? In what way are we those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Relevance of Bonhoeffer's Life and Thinking for this Inquiry

At the heart of Bonhoeffer's struggle was the question: "What does it mean in this particular moment and context for me to live out of my faith?" This is the same question which confronts each of us as we seek to live faithfully in the particulars of our own lives. I believe that Bonhoeffer's efforts to understand the relationship between his own faith and the necessity of concrete action in the midst of pressing historical circumstances offer us important clues for deciphering this same dilemma now.

Religionless Faith

With Bonhoeffer's movement from leadership in the Confessing Church to active participation in the political resistance, a dilemma which he had until then thought about but not had to address now came sharply into focus. While he hadn't expected the Confessing Church to provide political resistance to Hitler, he did feel that the Church could justify her existence only insofar as she spoke out on questions of tyranny and on behalf of its victims. It is no coincidence, then, that one of his themes in his teaching and writing in the underground seminaries was the theme of discipleship. He understood that the stakes for the conscientious Christian in Nazi Germany were becoming increasingly risky, and sought to form the young pastors with whom had been entrusted with that hard truth in mind.

"The Sermon on the Mount is not a word to be treated cavalierly — this, that or the other is not good, here we find an inconsistency. Its validity depends on its being obeyed. This is not a Word to be freely evaluated, not a Word that you can take or leave. It is a compelling, dominating Word."³

By 1939, Germany was on the verge of going to war, and anti-Semitism had clearly established itself as one of Hitler's policies. And the churches were all but silent. This included the Confessing Church, which was marshalling its energies to survive and to continue its work in the face of increasingly effective efforts on the part of the Nazi State to shut it down. Bonhoeffer's movement into the circle of resistance was a solitary one, made without the support and encouragement of the Confessing Church community on whose behalf he had struggled during the previous several years. Suddenly he found having moved from a world whose focus was on what to believe and confess, into one preoccupied with what was expedient, with success and failure, of risks, tactics and even compromise of some of his Christian convictions.

As he moved more and more deeply into the costly work of political resistance, he felt less and less able to affirm the religiosity of a church that had remained largely mute in the face of the developing Nazi menace. In contrast, he found himself surrounded by:

"... men who stand up for truth and right without compromise, though in danger of their lives. Here there are genuine worldliness in responsible action, a knowledge of reality free of ideology, representation and engagement on behalf of others. They are people who hold the necessary act in higher esteem than the unsullied conscience. Moreover, one is certain that if one asked about their motives, none of them would name Christian faith."⁴

Bonhoeffer began to feel that explicitly religious language was being invoked as "cheap currency" that substituted for and covered up the unread-

ness to take costly action in risky circumstances. If faith was, as he was coming to believe, a willingness to risk acting on behalf of others, he was concerned that religious trappings and even pietism could dangerously conceal people's real godlessness. Such people, Bonhoeffer wrote, "who describe themselves as *'religious'* do not in the least act up to it, and so presumably they mean something quite different by *'religious'*."⁵ He denounced a religiosity that dared to invoke the name of God while at the same time standing on the sidelines self-protectively as the world caved in around it.⁶

"In what way," he wondered instead, "are we religionless-secular Christians? In what way are we those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?"⁷ Faith, from his perspective, is not an abstract belief in the "highest, most powerful, and best Being imaginable," but should rather be understood as making flesh in our own lives the virtue of "being there for others" through concrete acts of service in any given situation."⁸

Bonhoeffer's nonreligious interpretation of Christianity has many compelling implications for those who feel called to live in the intersection of faith and organizational life:

- **The object of God's love is the whole world, not simply the church.** This understanding destroys the possibility of living a double existence⁹, roping off one part of our life for religion and leaving the rest unaffected. Faith is a whole-life response to God, whose passion is for the whole world and the whole of life.
- Another implication flows directly from the first: **Genuine faith will lead us not away from the world, but very much into it.** Faith will compel us to enter into the midst of the world's pain and ambiguity, where we will share in the sufferings of others and act on their behalf.
- **Our faith will lead us to hold the necessary act in greater esteem than the unspoiled conscience.** A response of faith will compel compassionate and responsible action even at the risk of contaminating the purity of our reputations as religious persons.
- When it comes to understanding what it means to move faithfully within the contexts of our worldly organizations, **we must guard against the temptation to speak religiously as a substitution for risking relevant and perhaps costly action.** Religious language is not capable of replacing the faithful act, but it is, apart from faithful action, capable of profaning our faith. Or, as Mick Comstock¹⁰ put it, correct doctrine is not the goal of faith. Rather, the aim of faith is the truing of our lives.
- **Our partners in faithful action within organizations may or may not share our particular religious tradition.** The community of the faithful are those who join with one another to hold an organization in trust, irregardless of whether they name the Name similarly.

Each of these themes from Bonhoeffer's idea of religionless Christianity holds clear relevance for our efforts to dwell intentionally in the interface of faith and organizational life. However, even a cursory reading of Bon-

Bonhoeffer speaks directly to a dialectic which frequently has been foreground in our conversations with men and women seeking to live faithfully in the intersection of their religious beliefs and the pressurized world of their organizations. On one hand, these folks understand that within the religiously pluralistic context of their organizational settings, the invocation of explicit religious language is a poor and frequently damaging substitute to wrestling effectively with the consequential and complex decisions which face them there. On the other hand, in the absence of explicitly religious discourse and reference points, believers in business are frequently left feeling uncertain that their best efforts to respond faithfully to the challenges before them resonate in any meaningful way with their sacred truths of their religious tradition.

hoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* will lead us to quickly recognize that his nonreligious interpretation did not eliminate his own hunger for reading the Bible, singing hymns, praying and sharing in explicitly religious fellowship. He simply felt that in a time when the church had been unprepared to take risks for others, it had forfeited its right to name the Name publicly. The need for these disciplines, however, did not disappear. Instead, their practice took place discreetly, as an arcane or secret discipline

The Arcane Discipline

Paradoxically, although Bonhoeffer's yearning for an understanding of faith which compels a profound identification with the world led him to propose a non-religious Christianity, it is was this very immersion in the struggles of the world that led Bonhoeffer also to wrestle with what kinds of disciplines would be necessary in order to strengthen his identity as a person of faith.

Operating, as he did, in a time when the Confessing Church and its seminaries were increasingly under attack, it is perhaps not surprising that in searching for clues about what such a practice might look like Bonhoeffer instinctively turned his attention to the early church whose members gathered clandestinely in the catacombs. Like those earliest Christians, Bonhoeffer sought to identify the ingredients for a secret or hidden discipline that would be capable of nurturing and sustaining one's belief and identity in a way that strengthened and freed them for costly action in the world. Drawing on his experience as director of Finkenwalde, in his book *Life Together* he described such a practice, outlining a hidden or arcane discipline of eucharistic fellowship, scripture-centered worship, prayer, and confession. In such secret gatherings, believers would employ explicitly religious language in naming the Name with one another, seeking to preserve both a sense of their connection to the "sacred" and an aliveness to the mysteries of their faith. By making of these practices a hidden discipline, Bonhoeffer addresses the need of the believer to attend to their religious identity in a way that "protects the world from violation by religion. Thus," observes Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge, "the arcane discipline acquires the important function of protecting the non-religious interpretation of Christianity from relapsing into religion."¹¹ Following his movement into the political resistance and eventual imprisonment, Bonhoeffer continued these traditional devotional practices in the solitude of his prison cell.

From his letters from prison it is clear that Bonhoeffer regarded the arcane discipline as an essential counterpart of religionless faith. In linking religionless faith and the arcane discipline in this way, Bonhoeffer speaks directly to a dialectic which frequently has been foreground in our conversations with men and women seeking to live faithfully in the intersection of their religious beliefs and the pressurized world of their organizations. On one hand, these folks understand that within the religiously pluralistic context of their organizational settings, the invocation of explicit religious language is a poor and frequently damaging substitute to wrestling effectively with the consequential and complex decisions which face them there. On the other hand, in the absence of explicitly religious discourse and reference points, believers in business are frequently left feeling uncertain that their best efforts to respond faithfully to the challenges before them resonate in any meaningful way with their sacred truths of their religious tradition.

By so intimately involving himself in the pain of the world, Bonhoeffer's theological speaking and writing was rooted in a dynamic praxis of action and reflection in which abstract theological and ethic concepts were forced to reckon with concrete historical dilemmas with all of their complexity and moral ambiguity.

Bonhoeffer's own approach acknowledges the essential importance of both these connections for a person of faith seeking to live faithfully in the world: their identification with the world and their relationship to the divine. Ultimately, from Bonhoeffer's perspective, neither of these dimensions of the life of faith is possible to engage adequately in isolation from the other. Each is essential to the other: prayer within and responsible human action without, secret discipline and public discipleship.¹²

Staying In the Mix

One of the most astonishing and instructive things about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and witness was the fact that he chose again and again to remain actively involved in the pain and struggle of his particular historical context. Clearly it would have been less costly to have assumed either the role of passive observer or the role of one who from a safe distance offers theological commentary on the events that were unfolding. Either would have been entirely understandable, but he chose instead to risk being an actor in the terrible drama which unfolded during those 15 years.

We are drawn back again to the observation that what you see has everything to do with where you stand. By so intimately involving himself in the pain of the world, Bonhoeffer's theological speaking and writing was rooted in a dynamic praxis of action and reflection in which abstract theological and ethical concepts were forced to reckon with concrete historical dilemmas in all of their complexity and moral ambiguity. "If you wish for God," he reflected, "hold fast to the world!"¹³

This has been an important guiding principle of our effort to explore the intersection of faith and organizational life: that the weight of our foot, as we reflect, must come down firmly in the swirl and complexity of God's world and particularly, in our case, in the world of organizational life. If we are seeking to theologically reflect on institutions and organizational life, then we must tangibly locate both ourselves and our process of reflecting in these settings. Moreover, our theological reflections in these settings must address themselves to the need to act in response to specific high-stakes dilemmas which are characterized by moral complexity and uncertain outcomes. For faith, in the words of Bonhoeffer, demands that we "hold the necessary act in greater esteem than the unspoiled conscience."¹⁴

Ministry to Institutions

While an active pastoral concern for the well being of individual persons was clearly an important dimension of Bonhoeffer's lived faith, much of his energy was poured into the struggle to call to faithfulness the institutions of Germany.

With regard to the Reich, Bonhoeffer challenged its policies not only as an individual but struggled to rouse the voice of the Confessing Church as a body in opposition to the unfolding horror. Later, working as a double agent, Bonhoeffer utilized his ecumenical connections outside of Germany to lay the groundwork to make it possible to negotiate articles of peace following the planned overthrow of Hitler's government.

From his perspective, the responsibility of the church went beyond the care of individuals to include the engagement of institutions.

"Is the Church's sole task to practice love and charity within the given

worldly institutions, i.e. to inspire these institutions so far as possible with a new outlook, to mitigate hardships, to care for the victims of these institutions, and to establish a new order of her own within the congregation? Or is the Church charged with a mission toward the given institutions themselves, a mission of correction, improvement, etc., a mission to work towards a new worldly order? Has the church merely to gather up those whom the wheel has crushed or has she to prevent the wheel from crushing them?"¹⁵

This is consistent with an earlier passage in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, in which he rejects limiting love's realm to the personal and individual to the exclusion of any concern for the institutional dimensions of life. He rejects this artificial separating of the personal from the institutional as entirely unbiblical: "A love which embraces only the sphere of personal human relations and which capitulates before the objective and real can never be the love of the New Testament."¹⁶

Bonhoeffer's conviction that Christians are called to respond not only to the needs of individual persons but also to engage institutions in ways that seek to hold them accountable to serve the purposes of love offers an important corrective to our tendency to focus our theological acumen and pastoral attention on the individual person alone.

As organizations, religious institutions are far more similar to their secular counterparts than they are different.

The Church as Institution

Bonhoeffer's conviction that the Church should become involved both in responding to the victims of the Reich's racist policies and in speaking out against those policies may obscure the reality that the focus of his struggle was for many years the church itself. While he would eventually be martyred for his role as a political dissident and enemy of the Reich, I suspect that it was the timidity and unfaithfulness of his own institution, the German Church, which pained Bonhoeffer the most. Bonhoeffer sought to influence his church both from within and without. As a member of the Pastors' Emergency League and later the Confessing Church he moved as a voice of organized and articulate dissent from within the National Church. From without he sought to utilize his ecumenical connections to the international community first to influence and then later to isolate the National Church for its role in religiously legitimating the Reich and its policies.

It may be tempting for us to imagine that the church is somehow less prone to the betrayals of trust and abuse of power of which the State or other secular institutions are capable in their fallenness. Much to our dismay, however, most of us know that this is not true. And if we lack firsthand experience with the church, even a casual reading of history or contemporary affairs will serve to quickly free us from the illusion that the church is immune to the problems of other more conspicuously secular institutions.

Just as it is true that individual persons of a particular religious tradition have a great deal in common with others of differing religious persuasions (their humanity, basic needs, fears, yearnings, and capacity for both good and evil), so it is also with organizations. As organizations, religious institutions are far more similar to their secular counterparts than they are different.

Although we may be dismayed that the church has so much in common with the world of other institutions, as Christians we come from a tradition

which celebrates God's readiness to "share our common lot." That the same is true for the church should neither surprise nor trouble us. Rather, it should free us to move less self-righteously and more confessionally in our regard for and engagement of "secular" organizations, with a renewed appreciation that we all stand imperfectly in relationship to our sacred truths and are in need of all the wisdom and accompaniment we can offer to one another.

Bonhoeffer Concluded

Although such a brief reflection on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and thinking and its relationship our own exploration of the connection between faith and organizational life cannot do him justice, you can nevertheless see why his story offers a compelling beginning for our inquiry. His determination to enter into the turmoil of his historical context; his commitment to meaningfully struggle with the institutions of his time from the perspective of his faith; and his perspective on how to work with the simultaneous impulses toward nurturing one's religious identity while at the same time identifying with the needs of the world—all of these commend Bonhoeffer as a relevant starting place for our conversation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own costly wrestling with this most terrible episode in Western history began but in no way concludes this review of early influences on our exploration of the relationship of faith and organizational life. During the years following the end of World War II, important initiatives emerged which represent serious attempts to respond to the haunting questions which result from the failure of individuals and institutions to interrupt the evil that emerged during that time.

For our own purposes here, we will briefly acknowledge several of them: the Evangelical Academies (Germany), the Kirchentag Movement (Germany), the Kerk en Wereld Movement (Holland), the Worker Priest Movement (France), the Industrial Mission Movement (United States), and the World Council of Churches' creation of "The Department of Laity." ■

¹ It is perhaps important to note that in order to assume these responsibilities, Bonhoeffer had to postpone plans to fulfill a longstanding desire: the wish to spend extended time in India living as part of Gandhi's community where he had hoped to discover a method of resisting Hitler that he could embrace as appropriate to his Christian principles.

² Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 559. [This passage is a citation by Bethge from the first volume of a collection of Bonhoeffer's papers, lecture notes, sermons, and correspondence entitled *Gesammelte Schriften*.]

³ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 369.

⁴ David. H. Hopper, *A Dissent On Bonhoeffer*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 102.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 279.

⁶ *Ibid.* 381.

⁷ *Ibid.* 280-81.

⁸ *Ibid.* 381.

⁹ Richard R. Broholm, *Bonhoeffer and the Ministry of the Laity*. (an unpublished paper written as part of the Andover Newton Laity Project), 7.

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¹¹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 786.

¹² James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary*. (New York: Abington Press, 1970), 182.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics.*, (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 321.

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics.*, (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 50. For this insight, I am indebted to Clifford Green, whose unpublished paper entitled "Bonhoeffer's 'Non-Religious Christianity' as Public Theology" called my attention to Bonhoeffer's thinking in this area.