

MRI SYMPOSIUM 2019

ABSTRACT

TITLE: Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Dirty Hands: What Counts as Martyrdom?

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On April 9, 1945 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazi German government for his role in the failed plot, on July 20, 1944, to assassinate the head of state, Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer did not have a direct role in the assassination attempt, for he was already in custody for his illegal activities in support of the German resistance and the anti-Nazi Protestant Confessing Churches. Nevertheless, in 1940 Bonhoeffer had been recruited by the coup plotters who organized the assassination attempt, and he did serve as a courier on various diplomatic missions between them and Germany's wartime adversaries.

Bonhoeffer was valuable to the resistance group because he was a Lutheran pastor and theologian who had impressive ecumenical credentials and contacts in the UK, USA, and Switzerland, through whom negotiations toward an armistice and a new German government might proceed. Bonhoeffer headed the illegal seminary of the Confessing Churches (1937-1940), and already had published significant theological reflections. Upon his arrest in 1943, he continued his writing and produced works that were published posthumously as *Ethik* (Ethics) and *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Letters and Papers from Prison), that established his outstanding reputation internationally.

As Bonhoeffer's story became more widely known after World War II, he has been lauded and honored as Christian martyr. His resistance to Nazism was clearly motivated by his concern, as in Confessing Churches' *Barmen Declaration* (1934), to reject the cult of Hitlerism and restore the Lordship of Jesus Christ. His intention, and his Christocentric focus in theology and ethics are clear from his posthumous writings. On that basis rests the claim made by his admirers that he should be canonized as a Christian martyr.

My presentation will present the facts of Bonhoeffer's life and work and will examine the classic ethical "Problem of Dirty Hands" in relationship to them. What counts as Christian martyrdom? Can someone rightly be considered a martyr, if he or she has been involved in a resistance movement that did not shrink from lethal violence? Should Bonhoeffer be regarded as a martyr because of his theologically motivated resistance to Hitler and Nazism, in spite of or perhaps because of his involvement in the failed, but violent assassination attempt?