

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Ecumenical Quest

KEITH CLEMENTS



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

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Cover and book design: Michelle Cook / 4 Seasons Book Design

Cover image and photo gallery courtesy of Bonhoeffer Bildarchiv and Gütersloher Verlagshaus

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1656-3

World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

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PREFACE

This book aims to show how and why for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from the conclusion of his student years in Berlin to his death on the Nazi gallows at Flossenbürg, the ecumenical movement was central to his concerns. Of course, during these years he fulfilled several distinct roles: academic theologian and teacher, leading protagonist for the Confessing Church, pastor, seminary director and—most dramatically and controversially—willing participant in the German resistance and the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler. But it is his commitment to and active involvement in the ecumenical movement that form the most continuous thread of his life and activity, and links all his various engagements. Equally, the challenge that he laid down to that movement in his time remains a legacy which has still to be fully claimed by the ecumenical world today. This book therefore has two potential readerships particularly in view: enthusiastic admirers of Bonhoeffer who need convincing of the significance of ecumenism for him; and ecumenists who, content to leave Bonhoeffer in effigy safely in the martyr's niche, have yet to consider what so invigoratingly he has to say—or, rather, what he has to question—about their contemporary concerns.

In writing this book, my own assumptions have been challenged or corrected at a number of points. As one who had been studying Bonhoeffer closely for more than forty years, and for much of that time also involved in full-time ecumenical work, I had had a sense of journeying with Bonhoeffer. But any notion that I had absorbed all there was to know about his role in the ecumenical movement of his time, and what his significance may be for the cause in ours, was soon

dispelled. I hope that readers may be as creatively surprised as I have been.

Thanks and acknowledgments are due to a number of friends and colleagues. First of all, I must thank Michael West, publisher at the World Council of Churches (WCC), who first suggested that I write on this topic, especially in view of the 70th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death being observed in 2015, and whose advice, help, and encouragement have been vital from start to finish. Also in Geneva, Hans von Rütte, WCC archivist, was most helpful in locating materials in the ecumenical collections and so enabling me to draw on documentation that sheds new light on the context in which Bonhoeffer was operating during the German Church Struggle, thus setting him in greater relief. Victoria Barnett, general editor of the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* English edition and scholar of the churches and the Holocaust, not only answered queries on historical detail but pointed me to further important sources and documentation, in particular relating to the American ecumenist Henry Smith Leiper; moreover, she went the third mile by reading the book in draft and making a number of factual corrections and very helpful suggestions. Others to whom I am grateful for advice or information on either the Bonhoeffer story or the wider ecumenical history, or both, are Stephen Brown, David Carter, Andrew Chandler, Alan Falconer, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, Clifford Green, Ulrich Möller, Larry Rasmussen, Mary Tanner, David Thompson, and Mark Woodruff. I must also thank my wife, Margaret, for additional help in surveying the almost-final manuscript with an eagle eye for lapses in English usage. The final result, remaining faults and all, is of course my own.

Portishead, England

ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIMADE	<i>Comité Inter-Mouvement auprès des Évacués</i>
CCBI	Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland
CTBI	Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
DBW	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke</i> , German edition
DBWE	<i>Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works</i> , English edition
IMC	International Missionary Council
JPIC	Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation
MSC	Missionary Structure of the Congregation
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> [“Nazi” Party]
PCR	Programme to Combat Racism
SA	<i>Sturmabteilung</i>
SCM	Student Christian Movement
SPCK	Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i>
WCC	World Council of Churches
WSCF	World Student Christian Federation
YWCA	Young Women’s Christian Association
YWCA	Young Men’s Christian Association

CITATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

All citations of Bonhoeffer are from the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Series (DBWE), published by Fortress Press, Minneapolis, and used with permission of Fortress Press.

Vol. 1, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Ed. Clifford J. Green. Trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. 1998.

Vol. 2, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*. Ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd and Hans-Richard Reuter. Trans. Martin Rumscheidt. 1996.

Vol. 3, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*. Ed. John W. de Gruchy. Trans. Douglas S. Bax. 1997.

Vol. 4, *Discipleship*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey. Transl. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss. 2000.

Vol. 5, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms*. Ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly. Trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness. 1996.

Vol. 6, *Ethics*. Ed. Clifford J. Green. Trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles West, and Douglas W. Stott. 2005.

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Vol. 12, *Berlin: 1932–1933*. Ed. Larry L. Rasmussen. Trans. Douglas W. Stott, Isabel Best and David Higgins. 2009.

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Vol. 15, *Theological Education Underground: 1937–1940*. Ed. Victoria J. Barnett. Trans. Claudia D. Bergmann, Scott A. Moore, and Peter Frick. 2011.

Vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945*. Ed. Mark Brocker. Trans. Lisa E. Dahill and Douglas W. Scott. 2006.

Further Note on Translation and English Usage

Where Bonhoeffer wrote originally in English, as for example to English-speaking correspondents, DBWE preserves his exact wording, even if this is not standard or absolutely correct English usage (for example “ecumenic” for “ecumenical”). In addition, both Bonhoeffer and many English-speaking writers of the time referred to *die Beken nende Kirche* as the “Confessional Church.” Today it is generally recognized that “Confessing Church” is the more accurate rendering and is so used in this book, but “Confessional” is retained when found in original English citations by Bonhoeffer or his contemporaries.

INTRODUCTION

“With Him, I Believe”: The Ecumenical Witness

“Tell him . . . With him I believe in the principle of our universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain.”

These are the last recorded words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a message to George Bell, bishop of Chichester. It was a bright spring morning on 8 April 1945, the first Sunday after Easter, and the war in Europe had barely four weeks to run. In the village of Schönberg, in southern Germany, a school had been turned into a makeshift jail to house a group of special prisoners being transported south from Buchenwald concentration camp. The prisoners were mostly Germans who for one reason or another had fallen foul of the Nazi regime, and were in some cases accompanied by their families. But they also included two British and a Russian. Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was

the only clergyman in the group, and both in Buchenwald and on the unpleasant week-long journey south he had endeared himself to the other prisoners by his calmness, kindness, courage, and cheerfulness. So on this Sunday morning, when hopes were rising that release or even escape might soon be in sight, several of the prisoners asked if he would conduct a prayer service for them in the upstairs room where they were being kept. Bonhoeffer was at first diffident: most of the company were Roman Catholics and he did not wish to impose a Protestant style on a (literally) captive audience. Not only so but the Russian, Vasily Kokorin, nephew of the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, was an atheist (though no doubt of Orthodox descent). Yet even Kokorin—with whom Bonhoeffer had spent time explaining Christianity in exchange for being taught some Russian—was in favour! The British prisoners, Captain Payne Best and Squadron Leader Hugh Falconer, have left us vivid and poignant recollections of what followed. In a way which met the conflicting hopes and anxieties of all his hearers, Bonhoeffer read and explained the biblical texts for the day, “With his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5) and “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3), and prayed on their behalf. Then, good Catholics included, all sang Luther’s great hymn *Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott* (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”). Hearing the sound, the families downstairs hoped they might smuggle Bonhoeffer in to minister to them, too. But it was too late. A car had arrived. Two Gestapo in civilian clothes came in and demanded that prisoner Bonhoeffer come with them. All knew what that meant.¹

Bonhoeffer, hastily packing his bag, was able to whisper to Payne Best, “This is the end—for me the beginning of life,” and asked him, if ever he had the opportunity, to convey to his closest English friend and ecumenical collaborator, George Bell, the message placed at the start of this chapter: “With him I believe . . .” Together with another prisoner, General Friedrich von Rabenau, he was taken back north to Flossenbürg execution camp. The next morning, with six others convicted for high treason on account of their involvement in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler, he was hanged—almost certainly with prolonged barbarity.

A Lutheran pastor conducting a service for a group of fellow prisoners of various Christian traditions or none, and of diverse nationalities and languages: this was a very ecumenical occasion! If this was so by accident rather than design, Bonhoeffer's message to George Bell (which, on his eventual return to England, Best was indeed able to give to the bishop) was a very different matter. This was a decidedly emphatic credo of ecumenical vision and commitment, all the more striking for where and when it was uttered. All around, Germany was falling into chaos amid the military collapse. No longer heard were the cries of *Heil!* ("Victory!"), which had accompanied the twelve-year Nazi Reich, and much of the rest of Europe lay in ruins. But Bonhoeffer, his own death imminent, dared to speak of victory, "our" victory, a victory of no one nationality or grouping—not even of the conquering Allies closing in on Berlin—but of the new community of Jesus Christ arising in the world, among all nations and as such the sign of a new world. Bonhoeffer was staking his soul on the certainty of that victory no less than on the triumph of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that living hope on which he had just preached and to which he now dared to look forward via the gallows at Flossenbürg.

We may thus describe this scene at Schönberg as a parable of ecumenical commitment. But it is more than that. It is the summation of a whole career of ecumenical engagement, that is, of commitment to the unity of the church of Christ in and for the *oikoumene*, the "whole inhabited earth." Bonhoeffer was an ecumenist, and this book seeks to explore what the ecumenical movement meant for Bonhoeffer, and what Bonhoeffer meant and can still mean for the ecumenical movement today.

An Ecumenist—Really?

To describe Bonhoeffer as an ecumenist will no doubt surprise some. The foremost popular image of him is of "the pastor who opposed Hitler"; who was a stalwart figure in the Confessing Church, that section of German Protestantism which resisted the nazification of the Evangelical Church's life and theology; who led an underground seminary

of pastors, teaching and writing powerfully about “costly grace and discipleship”; who joined the political resistance and became part of the plot actually to overthrow Hitler; who endured two years of imprisonment during which, in secret letters smuggled out to a friend, he set out astonishingly original ideas about a new form of Christianity—a “religionless Christianity”—for “a world come of age”; who died a martyr’s death, yet whose ideas about God, Christ, the church, and faith still have living force today, as radical and revolutionary as they did when first publicized over 60 years ago. But an ecumenist? Certainly, the skeptics may acknowledge, Bonhoeffer attended a number of ecumenical meetings and conferences, speaking powerfully at them, but were these any more than stage settings for his prophetic activity and utterances? Was he really occupied with what is often thought of as ecumenical activity, that is, promoting the unity or at least the closer collaboration of the churches nationally and internationally? Is not all this interchurch doctrinal dialogue and ecclesiastical engineering a manifestation of the self-concern of the churches and therefore just the opposite of what Bonhoeffer stood for? Bonhoeffer was surely above all set on making Christ real in the secular world, in politics and social life, in the struggle for peace, justice, and human rights. Indeed, at the end was he really concerned about churchly matters at all?

It is certainly the case that one can be among the most enthusiastic admirers of Bonhoeffer without manifesting equal interest in or regard for the ecumenical movement, whether of Bonhoeffer’s time or ours. All this serves to highlight a major factor in the reluctance to deal adequately with Bonhoeffer’s ecumenism, namely, the generally low esteem in which ecumenical life is now held relative to former times, together with the crisis in which even many of its most committed supporters now perceive it to be. Ecumenism, for many people today, even if they are not opposed to it, is simply not interesting as compared with the epic of a heroic pastor, radical theologian, and martyr for truth and justice. Even an informed and scholarly interest in Bonhoeffer can be accompanied by a dismissal of the ecumenical movement, at least as it has developed.² The same is even truer of writings at a more popular level.³ A negative attitude toward the present ecumenical movement, while in some respects understandable,

increases the potential to excise a fair slice from the core Bonhoeffer story. There is in fact a major problem here for any biographer of Bonhoeffer, for the ecumenical story of the 1930s *is* in many respects complex and daunting in its close-up detail, and the sensible biographer will wish to give a map sufficient to navigate the wood without getting lost in the trees. But to know fully the Bonhoeffer story does involve appreciating the specific detail of the work and why he was so passionate about it. Among the biographies, the most adequate treatment of Bonhoeffer's ecumenical role is still that provided by Eberhard Bethge.⁴ But even there the reader of today is liable to feel that the ecumenical scene amid which Bonhoeffer walked is a foreign country, whose customs and history require more explanation than time allows.

On the other hand, if interest in Bonhoeffer does not automatically mean an interest in his ecumenical involvement, does an ecumenical engagement today naturally breed an interest in Bonhoeffer? The answer has to be "Often yes, but . . ." The "Often yes" is due to two main factors. First, few Christian figures and theologians of the 20th century have had such an *ecumenically wide* reception and impact. Bonhoeffer's posthumous appeal and influence, whether as a courageous resister to tyranny or as a daringly innovative theologian, have been felt far beyond his native German Lutheran home, in every branch of Protestantism (including Pentecostal churches) in every part of the world, in the Anglican Communion, and among Roman Catholics and Orthodox, too. Not surprisingly, in view of his response to Nazism and the Holocaust, he is also a significant figure for many Jews and for Jewish-Christian dialogue (although for reasons which can be somewhat discomfiting for Christians, Jewish responses to Bonhoeffer are rarely as straightforward as might be expected). As a figure now posthumously inhabiting the *oikoumene*, therefore, Bonhoeffer serves as a common reference point for people of all Christian traditions, and often well beyond Christianity, too. He belongs naturally to the ecumenical scene.

The second factor prompting the "Often yes" answer is that many people who are engaged ecumenically, whether at local, national, or international levels, if they have more than a smattering of knowledge of the ecumenical story of the 20th century, will know at least

something of Bonhoeffer's own involvement in that story: his active association with such pioneering and influential ecumenical figures as J. H. Oldham, W. A. Visser't Hooft, Reinhold Niebuhr, Pierre Maury, C. F. Andrews, and Karl Barth, and above all his close friendship with Bishop George Bell. They will know of his participation in organizations like the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches and the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work. They will know that he provided a vital link between the Confessing Church in Germany and the ecumenical community abroad, and so forth. It was, moreover, largely through the ecumenical network that Bonhoeffer—who was almost unknown even in Germany at the time of his death—and his life and work came to be publicized in the years immediately following the Second World War. There is a sense, then, still today in ecumenical circles that Bonhoeffer belongs to the ecumenical scene: he is, one could say, one of us. Indeed, historian and Holocaust scholar Victoria Barnett can describe Bonhoeffer as an “ecumenical saint.”⁵

This, however, brings us to the “but . . .” part of the answer. It is one thing to claim an illustrious figure as belonging to one's church, party, cause, or movement, but quite another to take that person seriously for what they have actually said and done and for what they really represent. There is always the danger of using the hero—especially the martyr—as a kind of mascot or figurehead to promote the cause at the expense of asking whether the person in question would really have approved of the cause itself—or, at any rate, as it has developed. The saint can be adopted as patron in order to bestow reflected glory rather than to promote serious self-examination: an idealized projection of ourselves rather than a standard against which we are to be measured. This is not to say that the ecumenical movement as a whole or any organization within it has actually done this with Bonhoeffer, although one writer on student ecumenism went so far as to describe Bonhoeffer as “a martyr of the WSCF [World Student Christian Federation].”⁶ It is, rather, a matter of presuming that Bonhoeffer sits easily within the ecumenical story past and present, a presumption born out of the assumption that because he was involved in the ecumenical life of his time he was giving it his unqualified approval, and that by

the same token we have his ecumenical imprimatur for it today. It is an assumption fed in turn by lack of serious study of how Bonhoeffer actually acted in the ecumenical scene of the day and, above all, how his own theology of ecumenism developed. If many Bonhoeffer enthusiasts tend to ignore his ecumenism, ecumenical enthusiasts are apt to fight shy of looking in any depth at the nature of his ecumenical commitment, especially its theological dimension, and, above all, the *challenge* which he brought and still brings to ecumenism. For, as this study will show, Bonhoeffer did not sit comfortably with any of the ecumenical agencies of his own time. "The history of Bonhoeffer's connection with the ecumenical movement is fascinating because it is full of tensions,"⁷ states Eberhard Bethge, who lived with him through many of those tensions day to day. We should not assume he would be any less of a discomforting presence in our own context and activities, either. He was a disturber of the ecumenical peace, not because he was opposed to the movement but precisely because he believed in the ecumenical cause with a passion equal to none, and wanted it to take itself more seriously than it typically did.

"There is still no theology of the ecumenical movement." So declared Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the start of his address to a meeting in Czechoslovakia in 1932.⁸ Feathers might well have been ruffled by the directness, or arrogance, of such a claim being made by a relative newcomer to ecumenical life, a mere 26-year-old (and therefore in the "youth" category according to the protocols that still operate today for most ecumenical gatherings). After all, the modern movement had been running for at least a quarter of the century, and much had been written about it by theologians. The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 had inaugurated a new era of worldwide cooperation in evangelism and service. The World Alliance, which Bonhoeffer was now addressing, and the Life and Work movement were grappling with issues of peace and disarmament, and with social and economic problems, as ethical imperatives for the churches. Moreover, the Faith and Order movement was promoting theological dialogue between the major Christian traditions. No theology in all this? Of course there was, but Bonhoeffer was perceiving that while there was indeed much theological talk about the tasks of the churches and the needs of the

world in all the areas covered by these organizations, there was a notable blind spot: how the ecumenical movement evaluated *itself*, theologically. Or was it all just a pragmatic affair? When Christians from different traditions and from various nations met together, what was actually happening? Was it just a gathering of like-minded religious people sharing some common concerns on behalf of the churches? Or was it in some way not just a meeting *about* the churches and their work in the world, but a meeting *of* the one church of Jesus Christ witnessing to the world? Bonhoeffer repeatedly pressed this question, sometimes to the embarrassment of his colleagues, because, in his view, unless it was settled the ecumenical movement had no firm basis on which to stand, no rock that could outface the competing tidal surges of nationalism, racism, war, and confessional chauvinism, no sense of mandate to speak God's word to the world. It had to dare to believe in itself as the church of the *oikoumene*, and venture to *act* accordingly. This was provocative at the time, and is no less so today.

An Inspiration Still to Be Claimed

"There is still no theology of the ecumenical movement." Placed alongside Bonhoeffer's 1932 statement, a comment made 64 years later by Konrad Raiser, the then general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), sounds with a telling resonance: "The organized ecumenical movement still has to claim Dietrich Bonhoeffer as one of its great sources of continuing inspiration."⁹ Raiser's comment comes in the opening paragraph of a paper which still stands as one of the most important overall surveys of both Bonhoeffer's ecumenical activity and the significance of his legacy for the ecumenical movement. As far as the historical record of Bonhoeffer's ecumenical activity is concerned, there has been no shortage of material on the subject. The pioneering documentation by the Danish scholar Jørgen Glenthøj in the 1950s, together with the historical treatment of the German Church Struggle and its ecumenical dimensions by Armin Boyens in the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention the monumental and definitive biography by Bonhoeffer's closest friend Eberhard Bethge, have laid

essential and sure foundations.¹⁰ Moreover, all the relevant historical sources are now readily available in the new German and English editions of the entire Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works.¹¹ Nor are we entirely lacking in discussion and analysis of the continuing significance of Bonhoeffer for ecumenism. In addition to Raiser's presentation, there are substantial published papers by such experts as W. A. Visser't Hooft,¹² Ulrich Duchrow,¹³ Victoria Barnett,¹⁴ and John Moses.¹⁵ Yet it remains the case that, as Raiser states: "In the mainline discussion about the significance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his involvement in the ecumenical movement has received relatively little attention."¹⁶ We can demonstrate this relative paucity with some precision. Since the 1940s, the recorded books and published articles on Bonhoeffer number almost 4,000.¹⁷ To date, those whose titles indicate a dealing in any way, even the most tangential, with his ecumenical activity and theology, or their continuing significance for the *oikoumene*, number 66—well under 2 percent of the total. Such themes as God, "death of God theology," world, religion, religionless Christianity, resistance, secularization, and (especially) ethics score far more heavily.¹⁸

Some disparity in treatment is of course to be expected. It was, after all, his exceptional status as "the pastor who resisted Hitler" to the point of martyrdom, together with the radical content of his prison letters, which so immediately brought Bonhoeffer to centre stage in international attention in the first place. That initial impact was so great as virtually to ensure a continuing momentum of interest in those directions. By contrast with this nearly universal interest in political ethics and the nature of faith in face of modernity and secularization, active ecumenical engagement is evidently a more specialized concern; one, moreover, in which, as has been noted for various reasons, interest has progressively diminished in recent decades. Nevertheless, quite apart from the contemporary slackening in enthusiasm for the quest for unity, it is worth probing a little more deeply to identify other issues which can inhibit a serious study of Bonhoeffer's ecumenism or divert attention away from it. A study such as this will need to address these factors, which, moreover, readers may need to recognize and even admit to owning themselves, if what follows in these pages is to be fruitful. I suggest three in particular.

The first is that in treating Bonhoeffer's ecumenical engagement we are dealing to a significant extent with *history*, and a truly historical interest and awareness—as distinct from a vague sense of the past—cannot be taken for granted today, at least in Western society and its churches. I have written elsewhere¹⁹ of a virtual amnesia even among church leaders about the story of their respective communities and therewith the ecumenical story, too. Of course, too great a preoccupation with the past is unhealthy, but so, too, is a loss of memory and therewith is a loss of direction and sense of identity, from which follow an inability and lack of courage to live and write the next chapter in the story. This is a feature of a society where, under globalizing pressures and instantaneous communication, everything is fixated on the present, where not only do pressing contemporary problems vociferously call for immediate answers and solutions, but where wants and desires—created and manipulated by powerful economic interests—demand instant gratification. It is a situation that Bonhoeffer himself perceived, writing in his *Ethics* during the Second World War:

There is no future and no past. There remains only the present moment rescued from nothingness and the desire to grasp the next moment. Already yesterday's concerns are consigned to forgetfulness, and tomorrow's are too far away to obligate us today. The burden of yesterday is shaken off by glorifying shadowy times of old; the task of tomorrow is avoided by talking about the coming millennium. Nothing is fixed, and nothing holds us. The film, vanishing from memory as soon as it ends, symbolizes the profound amnesia of our time.²⁰

In our own time, Rowan Williams has similarly written about how, in the contemporary West, it has been forgotten that as persons we are produced, formed in our biology and psychology “by the passage of time,” and instead have adopted a worldview “of timeless consuming egos, adopting and discarding styles of self-presentation and self-assertion.”²¹ In such a situation where the past becomes seemingly irrelevant and the future unimaginable, it is not easy to persuade ourselves to take any history seriously. In our particular case, we have

to beware of simply conjuring up a Bonhoeffer figure as an example to supply a ready dose of inspiration in our present difficulties. To look at him and listen to him in his actual context is an exercise of a different order.

Second, if we are dealing with history, then we have to combat the tendency in all of us simply to make that history tell the story we wish to hear in order to suit and bolster our present commitments or prejudices. We have grown used to recognizing that the writing and teaching of history easily falls prey to contemporary ideological interests: hence, for example, the way that history is taught in schools is a matter for perennial debate in many countries because it brings political interests to the surface. What was the really great period in your country's history? Before the revolution? After independence? Or when? Or, our view of history can be coloured by a pervasive assumption about the way the world is or how we would like it to be. The English historian Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979), who was a devout Christian, coined the term "the Whig interpretation of history"²² to denote the assumption that history is a story of continual progress toward ever greater human enlightenment and betterment, particularly in political conditions. Awkward facts, like new despotisms or global economic disasters or environmental catastrophes, which do not fit into such a scheme tend to be discounted or explained away. No less, Christian and church history, including ecumenical history, has to beware lest it construct a history largely determined by theological interests, and nowhere is this more so than with a figure like Bonhoeffer.

Andrew Chandler, a British historian with a special interest in the German Church Struggle, the resistance, and the roles of such as Bonhoeffer and Bishop George Bell, has spoken of historians' irritation at theologians whose high regard for Bonhoeffer tempts them to a cavalier treatment of the actual history of which he was a part.²³ Theological lauding of Bonhoeffer's significance can easily lead to exaggerated or otherwise distorted claims for what he actually did, which in turn lead to an obscuring of his truer and actually more important significance. For example, to say that Bonhoeffer was a courageous and outspoken opponent of Hitler (and therefore according his theology a special moral validity) can prompt a picture of him as leading

from the front, and on all fronts, in the resistance and conspiracy. In terms of effective engagement, Bonhoeffer came into the active political resistance quite late in the day (in the second year of the war) and in a relatively minor role. Granted, that was a fateful step to take, since after the failure of the assassination attempt of 20 July 1944 any known involvement in the conspiracy was to lead to almost certain death. But the point that Chandler makes is that theological statements about Bonhoeffer need to be checked out against the actual history, not in order to diminish his significance, but to identify more precisely what that significance is, what form his courage actually took, and the specific point to which he applied it. Only so can proper connections be made between him and our own context. The same must hold for assessing his ecumenical significance. Ecumenical history can itself be prone to a "Whig interpretation," a march of continual progress,²⁴ and Bonhoeffer can be conveniently slotted into it as a martyr figure to add lustre to it. In contrast, there has to be a discipline of checking whether the weight of the theology we ascribe to Bonhoeffer can be borne by the actual story in which it is set, and whether we might be missing some vital clues. The contribution he makes to our ecumenical enterprise may then prove to be not quite what we imagined, yet indeed more pertinent.

Third, following from the above, there is the innate tendency to become so focused on the renowned subject as an individual that we lose a full sense of the matrix of *relationships* which constitute such a large a part of anyone's life. This is always a special temptation with Bonhoeffer, who, because in many ways he was indeed an exceptional person in his context, becomes extracted from those with whose lives he was bound up at so many levels. He is turned into a lone knight-errant riding out against the dragons and demons, rather than a member of a larger company. This becomes particularly evident in the various attempts that have been made to dramatize Bonhoeffer's story on stage or screen. Neither the play nor the film are forms that really allow the multilayered world of relationships to be dealt with adequately. They are reduced to leaving Bonhoeffer an excessively lone and romanticized, heroic figure.²⁵ The novel offers better possibilities for keeping the dimension of relationships in view.²⁶ With Bonhoeffer,

moreover, abstraction from his relationships constitutes a gross violation of who he was. His relationships with family, close friends, colleagues near and far, with fellow prisoners (and even his guards in some cases), were not an extra to his life, or merely its setting, but its very substance. Even in his prison writings he was not communing just with himself, but with others and, above all, with Eberhard Bethge. It is very doubtful whether without Bethge, that "daring, trusting spirit" as a friend to hand, he would have written as he did.²⁷

Further, not only in his being but in his thought, *sociality*, human life as relational, was central. This has an obvious bearing on what to expect when we explore Bonhoeffer's vision and commitment to the ecumenical movement, for if nothing else the ecumenical movement is about the *community* of Christ becoming more visibly one for the sake of the whole inhabited earth, the *oikoumene*. We should expect ecumenism, as the fullest manifestation of true community in Christ, to be of prime importance to someone for whom human beings are created in and for mutual relationships as the true form of freedom²⁸ and for whom the church itself is "Christ existing as community." But such an expectation will have to compete with the innate individualistic impulses of the reader, an impulse which these days is liable to be fed by a quest for a rather restricted and precious kind of spirituality. A selective reading of Bonhoeffer on discipleship, in particular, can too readily feed an individual's ego with aspirations after becoming an exceptional person oneself. True, Bonhoeffer's stunning book *Discipleship* stresses the personal call of Jesus to follow him, and has a whole chapter on "Discipleship and the Individual": "Jesus' call to discipleship makes the disciple into a single individual. Whether disciples want to or not, they have to make a decision; each has to decide alone. It is not their own choice to desire to be single individuals. Instead, Christ makes everyone he calls into an individual. Each is called alone. Each must follow alone."²⁹ In the context in which it was written, this was clearly a riposte to the appeal of Nazism as a movement in which all sense of individuality was submerged in the mass appeal of the party and *Volks*, and all personal responsibility surrendered to the will of the *Führer*. But note that the individual who remains subject to the call of Jesus is not left to him- or herself in isolation. Nearly half of

Discipleship is devoted to the *community* of the disciples led by Jesus, and to the church as the body of Christ, and it concludes with an emphatic depiction of Christ as the one who unites us in his solidarity with all who suffer, and by whom we are thereby “delivered from the isolation caused by sin, and at the same time restored to the whole of humanity.”³⁰

What is more, it is striking how often Bonhoeffer throughout his career writes in the first-person plural “we,” not the singular “I.” He communicates both to and on behalf of a community, as one of its members. Whenever he preaches, he stands in and with his congregation invoking God’s judgment and grace upon “us.” He is a member of the resistance but is not himself the resistance in its entirety, nor one of its leaders. He is a minor player, but he articulates a theology and ethics for the resistance as a whole. “Are *we* still of any use?” he asks in his short wartime essay “After Ten Years,” a Christmas gift for his family members and close friends in the resistance.³¹ His moving poem *Who Am I?*, written in Tegel Prison, is all the more striking because in his “lonely” enforced isolation and predicament Bonhoeffer is nevertheless “helplessly fearing for friends so far away.”³² Notice, too, how in his final message to George Bell it is “*with him*”—not “as” or “like”—he believes in the reality of the ecumenical fellowship. To become attuned to Bonhoeffer we must repeatedly adapt to his communal tone.

In this study, therefore, we shall move through Bonhoeffer’s career and the ecumenical movement of his time, seeking to do justice to both, and tracing the interconnections and interactions at a number of levels. We shall in chapter 1 observe Bonhoeffer’s personal ecumenical formation through his upbringing and his student years, including his remarkable fundamental theology of the church which he set out in his youthful doctoral thesis, and see how both this and his widening experiences of the world outside Germany were woven seamlessly into his first ecumenical engagement and responsibility. We shall then (ch. 2) map out as clearly as possible the main features, organizations, and leaders of the ecumenical scene which Bonhoeffer entered in the early 1930s, and describe how Bonhoeffer began to make an impact on them. In chapters 3 through 7, we shall focus on Bonhoeffer’s

ecumenical witness for peace and role in the German Church Struggle, with his efforts to represent the Confessing Church and the ecumenical fellowship to each other. In chapter 8, we move with Bonhoeffer toward the Second World War and the shifting priorities of ecumenism and political opposition, leading in chapter 9 into the wartime resistance and thence in chapter 10 to his imprisonment and death. His new theological explorations into a "religionless Christianity," it will be argued, did not mean a departure from his ecumenical engagement but a continuation of it in a new key. Finally (ch. 11) we shall survey Bonhoeffer's ecumenical impact since his death and conclude with a discussion of his relevance for the ecumenical movement of today and tomorrow. In the end, it is to be hoped, at least some readers will be encouraged to say with renewed confidence: "With *him*—Bonhoeffer—we too believe in . . ."

CHAPTER 1

Young Bonhoeffer: A Case Study in Ecumenical Formation

In November 1930, while an exchange student in the USA, Dietrich Bonhoeffer received a letter from his cousin Hans Christoph von Hase, who was also a theologian, hoping to find out “the extent to which you still belong to domestic theology or have already become an ecumenist.”¹ How one *becomes* an ecumenist takes us to the heart both of Bonhoeffer’s life and thought, and the story of the modern ecumenical movement. For over 50 years, few topics have exercised the World Council of Churches (WCC) and kindred bodies more than “ecumenical formation” or “ecumenical learning.”² The very fact that at least two terms are used, often interchangeably but sometimes with arguments as to whether they mean quite the same thing³ (and for good measure joined by “ecumenical education”), is significant. It shows that a range of elements may be in view when considering how people are brought into a committed, knowledgeable, and active engagement in the ecumenical movement, at any level from the local

to the international. In 1983, the WCC sixth assembly at Vancouver listed six features of ecumenical learning as “a constitutive dimension for the church as church”: (1) it transcends barriers of birth and context because it responds to the word of God and the horizons of God’s promise; (2) it is action oriented, not seeking information only; (3) it is done in community, in which relationships are established with others both near and far; (4) it means learning together, “detecting the global in the local, the unfamiliar in the context of one’s own environment”; (5) it is intercultural; and (6) it is a total process, in which social and religious learning are unified.⁴ My own preference is to speak of “formation,” provided it is not taken to imply that it is ever complete or final (there are no finishing schools in Christianity).⁵ More than “learning” or “education,” it does justice to the multiplicity of factors in what is an inclusive, open-ended process of growth embracing personal experience, encounters with others, widening knowledge of other traditions and environments in the *oikoumene*, intellectual discovery, deepening spirituality, and committed action, as well as prescribed courses of learning.

This preference grows even stronger in considering the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Here is a prime example of someone who did not suddenly emerge as a ready-made ecumenist but surprisingly *became* one, having started from what at first sight was an unlikely background. He did so, moreover, at a time long before ecumenical formation was conceived of in any formal educational or programmatic sense.⁶ We might say that with Bonhoeffer it simply happened, or, rather, that he was formed ecumenically without having consciously sought to be an ecumenist or being subjected to any educational programme designed to move him in that direction. Through a variety of factors, including family and upbringing, foreign travel and experiences abroad, and the forging of friendships and relationships with people from contexts very different from his own, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s early life brilliantly illustrates all six features listed by the Vancouver Assembly and to that extent powerfully endorses the received wisdom on ecumenical formation.

At the same time, however, he was driven by a peculiarly powerful impulse, one which was unique to his youthful formation: his

discovery of a particular theology of the church which proved to be intrinsically ecumenical. More than he himself probably realized at the time, this was to have enormous significance for his struggles in the political and religious upheavals that lay ahead. Further, the story of his ecumenical formation includes a result not specified in the Vancouver assembly list and which indeed does not sit readily into any type of programme. It was, however, crucial: the emergence of a new kind of *self-consciousness and sense of identity*.

Hans Christoph von Hase, at least, suspected that his cousin's life was on a certain trajectory. In this chapter we shall examine this trajectory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ecumenical formation from childhood to his return from studies in the USA, aged 25, in June 1931.

Upbringing

The births of Dietrich and his twin sister Sabine in Breslau on 4 February 1906 were additions to an already sizeable and still growing family: three older brothers and two sisters, with another sister to arrive three years later.⁷ The father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was a leading psychiatrist and neurologist, and the family moved to Berlin in 1912 on his appointment as professor and director of the University Psychiatric Clinic. The Bonhoeffer household was privileged in every way typical of an upper-class family of the time: servants, private tutors for the children, the enjoyments of high culture, and, for good measure, a country house for the summer holidays. Birth into this home, however, was introduction not just into the immediate family and its comforts but into a longstanding family tradition. The mother, Paula (née von Hase), came from an aristocratic Prussian line that had produced distinguished artists, musicians, and scholars (including theologians). The paternal ancestry lay in Schwäbisch Hall, Württemberg, where successive generations of Bonhoeffers had served as pastors, doctors, city councillors, and mayors, and (in the case of Karl Bonhoeffer's father) a high judiciary official for the state of Württemberg. Eberhard Bethge sums up the effect of this: "The rich world of his ancestors set the standards for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own life. It

gave him a certainty of judgment and manner that cannot be acquired in a single generation. He grew up in a family that believed that the essence of learning lay not in a formal education but in the deeply rooted obligation to be guardians of a great historical heritage and intellectual tradition.”⁸ To be guardian, however, did not imply slavish adherence. It meant assessing contemporary issues and challenges in the light of the tradition, and in turn reflecting on how that tradition of responsibility might need to take new forms in face of those challenges. It meant the capacity to think independently and critically, not just repetitively. Here Karl Bonhoeffer, retiring by nature and a man of few but well-chosen words, had a profound influence on all his children. As a psychiatrist, he was cautious in his judgments, averse to the Freudian theories then coming into vogue, preferring to study the empirical data of disorders rather than speculate on what might lie beneath them. Dietrich's sister Sabine writes: “Above all, he hoped that we would truly learn to distinguish the essential from the inessential, and would come to recognize our own limitations. His great tolerance left no room for narrow-mindedness, and broadened the horizons of our home.”⁹ Anyone wishing to know where ecumenical education begins might usefully ponder this parental example.

Part of the family tradition was, of course, German Lutheranism. There had been pastors on both sides of the family, most notably and recently the maternal. Paula Bonhoeffer's father, Karl Alfred von Hase (1842–1914), had been professor of practical theology at Jena, and performed the baptisms of the Bonhoeffer children. But the Bonhoeffers were not a church-going family. Karl Bonhoeffer was an agnostic: not antireligious but quietly skeptical while respectful of others' beliefs. As with many middle-class German Protestants of the time, for the Bonhoeffers religion was a matter of the rites of passage and, if desired, domestic piety. The latter was certainly practiced in the Bonhoeffer household since Paula Bonhoeffer, as well as providing the basic education of her children in their earliest years, also saw to their religious instruction through Bible stories, hymns, and prayers. She had in her youth spent some time with the Moravian community at Herrnhut and imbibed its spirit of warm, Bible-based personal devotion to Christ. The Herrnhuter piety may have had to be restrained to

suit the sophisticated regime of the Bonhoeffer home, but it also came to be reaffirmed with the arrival in 1908 of a governess, Maria Horn, a member of the Herrnhut community who taught the children for the next 15 years and was dearly loved by all the family. Much later in life, Dietrich would adopt the Moravians' biblical *Losungen* (the "Watchwords") for his daily meditations.

It was, then, a family which accepted as a matter of course that it belonged to the Lutheran church but sat loose to its institutional life. Church was there, but nothing to get too excited about. If there was to be religion, then personal devotion mattered more than public practice and liturgical observance. Certainly there was no anti-Catholic chauvinism or obsession with the Lutheran confessional formulae. It came therefore as a surprise to his parents and siblings when, still a boy, Dietrich announced his wish to become a theologian, in contrast to the older offspring who were on their way to becoming (or marrying) scientists or lawyers. For a time it had seemed that Dietrich's future lay in music (he was proving a brilliant pianist), but even his agnostic father did not stand in his way. His brothers taunted him with the idea that the church was dead. "Then I'll change it," retorted Dietrich. Perhaps, as youngest son, he was wishing to assert his independence. But a deeper motivation may well have been at work. The 1914–18 war did not spare the Bonhoeffers their share of tragedy. All three older sons, Karl-Friedrich, Walter, and Klaus, were called up. Walter, aged barely 18, died of wounds in 1918. The stability and happiness of this family, close-knit in unswerving mutual loyalty, was for a time shattered and never wholly recovered. Dietrich never forgot his mother's grief, which traumatized her for long months. The fact and significance of Walter's death certainly left an indelible mark on his youngest brother, stained with the real horror of war. It may well also have turned him toward the question he was to raise again and again until his last year: "Who is God?"

Meanwhile, Dietrich continued his studies at the local *Gymnasium* (high school). In the summer of 1920 while on a walking tour in the Harz Mountains he wrote to his parents an account of a visit to Nordhausen and its Romanesque cathedral:

We were in it. It is obviously still used as a Catholic church. It truly was the first time that I had been in a Catholic church, and I was completely surprised by the splendor. The entire altar was covered with gold, and there were paintings of the saints and the Virgin Mary everywhere. They had probably been painted a long time ago. Having seen this, one can understand how something like it can attract simple people.¹⁰

If this shows the naïve first impressions of a 14-year-old, with a slightly condescending tone in the last sentence, it also reveals a straightforward curiosity about what is there, a willingness to be surprised and to reconsider presuppositions. His home nurturing of respectfulness was manifesting itself.

In April 1923 Dietrich, aged 17, began a year of theological studies at Tübingen University. He immersed himself in a wide range of student activities (even including a spell of military training) but evidently had no time for or interest in the lively branch of the Student Christian Movement there. Indeed, his most memorable religious encounter was once again provided by Roman Catholicism, a Corpus Christi procession in Rottenburg “which made a great impression on me. . . . It really makes a very distinct impression when you hear the approaching people in the procession praying from a long way off. . . . Everyone seems to be earnestly participating.”¹¹ When he left Tübingen in the spring of 1924 he remained as committed as ever to theology, but the readiness for new encounters and widening experiences was about to be rewarded in ways he could not have imagined.

Rome 1924

In April 1924 Dietrich, accompanied by his brother Klaus, embarked on a two-and-a-half-month visit to Italy, most of the time to be spent in Rome ostensibly for study (either in the German college or the Gregorian University—the details are unclear). For a cultivated young German, Italy promised an exciting pilgrimage to the classical roots of his culture. His travel diary records: “It feels strange when one first

crosses the Italian border. Fantasy begins to transform itself into reality. Will it really be nice to have all one's wishes fulfilled? Or might I return home completely disillusioned after all? But reality is, quite certainly, more beautiful than fantasy."¹² As expected, he revelled in the Roman sites and artifacts of antiquity, but what he was not prepared for was the impact of Roman Catholicism on full display on its home ground. Already on the journey south he was in continual lively discussion and argument with a Catholic seminarian. Then came a succession of stunning encounters with St. Peter's and the other great churches of Rome, and above all during the services of Holy Week and Easter. It was not just the glorious music that impressed him (though it did, rapturously). In St Peter's on Palm Sunday the gospel passion narrative was read, with many priests, seminarians, and monks of different nationalities standing with the cardinal at the altar: "The universality of the church was illustrated in a marvellously effective manner. White, black, yellow members of religious orders—everyone was in clerical robes united under the church. It truly seems ideal."¹³ Nor could this be described only as outward observance. That evening in Trinità dei Mondi he was moved by the singing of the novice nuns—"unbelievable simplicity, grace and great seriousness." "The ritual was truly no longer merely ritual. Instead, it was worship in the true sense. The whole thing gave one an unparalleled impression of profound, guileless piety."¹⁴ The sincerity of devotion was no less evident to him next day, an important day of confession, in Santa Maria Maggiore:

All the confessionals are occupied and densely surrounded by people praying. It is gratifying to see so many serious faces; nothing that you can say against Catholicism applies to them. The children also confess with true fervor. It is very touching to see that for many of these people confession has not become an obligation, but a necessity. . . . For those people who are religiously astute, it is the concretization of the idea of the church that is fulfilled in confession and absolution.¹⁵

So to the climax of Holy Week, "unbelievably impressive,"¹⁶ hour after hour in St Peter's from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day, with an

Italian priest alongside him to explain everything, and more discussions about Protestant–Catholic differences.

The eighteen-year-old German Lutheran was being given profound cause for reflection by these experiences. He wrote to his parents: “The unification of Catholicism and Protestantism is probably impossible, although it would do both parties much good. Catholicism will be able to exist for a long time without Protestantism. The people are still very devoted [to it]. The Protestant church often seems like a small sect when compared to the enormous range of the local festivals.”¹⁷ Clearly he was asking if, compared with Catholicism, his easy-going, bourgeois, individualistic, non-church-attending Protestantism, took *church* seriously. Four years later, in Barcelona, he would begin a sermon on “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:26f.) by contrasting how the feelings of awe and bliss, a sense of a beloved “home,” which the word “church” evokes for Catholics, compares with the indifference and banality typical of Protestants when they hear the same word.¹⁸ It is clear that in Rome Bonhoeffer was allowing his curiosity and interest to take him beyond any ignorance and prejudice, to see and see into what was there in this other tradition; to try to understand it on its own terms and to empathize with what it meant for its participants; and not only so, but then to reflect further on what this encounter revealed about himself and his native background, upbringing, and faith tradition. He was learning about himself through encountering and learning about the other, and so forming a wider conception of the world of which both were part. This was at the heart of his ecumenical formation. Clearly, he was not being swept off into a mindless romanticization of this exotically new world (an audience with the pope made an “indifferent” impression on him¹⁹), though he always did regard Rome as his favourite spot on earth and once confessed that at times he was tempted to become a Catholic.²⁰ But he was learning to see things more objectively as they were, and by the same token to view his own tradition in a new way.

It was not, however, only Catholicism that was prompting such reflection. At home in Germany Bonhoeffer would probably have had very little if any acquaintance with the small free churches such as the Baptists, Methodists, and the *freie evangelische Gemeinde*, apt to be

regarded by the historic Protestant churches, the *Volkskirche*, as “sects.” But then as today, the Protestant minority communities were also to be found in Rome,²¹ and on Ascension Day, 29 May, while visiting the Trastevere district, Bonhoeffer’s diary records: “*Baptism* in a small sect with good choral music.”²² It is now known that this was the Baptist Church of Roma Trastevere, located at Via della Lungaretta 124, and that on this day two adult believers were baptized.²³ Bonhoeffer muses: “Maybe Protestantism should not have tried to become an established church; perhaps it should have remained a large sect, which always have an easier time, and so might have avoided the present calamity.”²⁴ By “calamity” he means the effective end of the territorial church’s claim on the masses, its ability “to give everyone something.” The end of the tie between church and state confronts Protestantism with the truth that it has now nothing distinctive to offer to the people. “If Protestantism had never become an established church, the situation would be completely different. It would still have a not inconsequential number of enthusiastic adherents. In view of its size, it would hardly be designated as a sect but would represent an unusual phenomenon of religious life and serious thoughtful piety. It would therefore be the ideal form of religion, which is sought after in so many ways today.” This no less than the fundamental Catholic emphasis on *church* was, at least in the form of a question if not an idea, to be an important souvenir to take home to Germany, a creative irritant in the working out of his first major theological enterprise in *Sanctorum Communio*. We should note how Bonhoeffer uses the word *ideal* to describe both the universality of the multinational Catholicism that he glimpsed in St Peter’s on Palm Sunday, and the possibility of Protestantism as a “large sect,” drawing its strength from the enthusiasm of its members and not dependent on the state.

The Bonhoeffer brothers did not confine themselves to Rome. They travelled south to Naples and Sicily, from where they even ventured across to Tripoli in Libya. This brief venture into the fascinating Arab world of North Africa pushed the horizons of experience still further: “In general, it seems to me that there is immense similarity between Islam and the lifestyle and piety recorded in the Old Testament,” he wrote to his parents, for “In Islam, everyday life and religion

are not separated at all";²⁵ and "It would really be interesting to study Islam on its own soil . . .," he comments wistfully afterwards. But for reasons which are not clear, the Libyan experience had to be curtailed hurriedly and Dietrich, at least, was evidently glad to be back in Europe again: there was simply so much that was new to absorb in Africa, with too little time to reflect upon it. At any rate, on his return to home in Berlin in June 1924 he had proved to himself the value of seeing and learning from other worlds and other traditions.

Berlin and *Sanctorum Communio*

In the summer of 1924 Dietrich Bonhoeffer resumed his studies not in Tübingen but at his home university of Berlin, and plunged into intensive courses in biblical studies, systematic theology, philosophy, and church history. The Berlin theology faculty, from the time of its founding genius F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834), had been renowned for its leading role in liberal Protestant thought. In the light of modern scientific and critical thought, liberal theologians sought to present Christian belief on the basis not of the dogmatic foundations of the past, but based instead on the nature of actual religious experience and on what could be reliably reconstructed, by modern historical research, of the teaching and history of Jesus embedded in the gospel records and the New Testament as a whole. Reigning over Berlin theology from the turn of the century was Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), renowned internationally for his erudition in New Testament and church history. His acclaimed lectures in 1899–1900 on the essence of Christianity²⁶ succinctly summarized the liberal credo: the teaching of Jesus comprised the fatherhood of God, the human soul so ennobled as to unite with him, and the moral influence of faith in spreading the brotherhood of humankind over the earth. Scarcely less erudite was Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) who, notwithstanding his death the year before Bonhoeffer began his Berlin studies, was to remain a powerful force in the philosophy of history and, especially, the study of the various social forms in which Christianity manifested itself.²⁷

The liberal ethos of Berlin meant that theology was essentially the study of human religious experience, thought, and history. From the end of the First World War, however, a different theological wind had started to blow across continental Europe. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) had sounded the alarm call for a decisive about-turn in theology, from talk about the religious aspirations of humanity to the holiness, judgment, and grace of the “wholly other” God who is known only in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. His famous commentary on Romans²⁸ turned Paul’s attack on “the law” as the way to salvation into a full-scale onslaught on contemporary theology’s focus on “religion.” Naturally, this sounded dangerously irrational and retrograde to many liberal theologians and a war of words ensued between Harnack and Barth, who from 1921 was teaching in Germany.

It is known that Bonhoeffer was reading Barth’s *The Word of God and the Word of Man* by the summer of 1925. He would have read, for example:

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible.²⁹

Bonhoeffer was captured. He had found the one who would be his chief theological mentor to the end of his days. Henceforth, he could justly be labelled a Barthian, which made him a somewhat unusual figure in liberal Berlin. He was not, however, an uncritical disciple, as will be seen. Moreover, and very unusually for a young and enthusiastic convert, becoming pro-Barth did not for him mean *ipso facto* becoming anti-Harnack in every respect. Indeed, Bonhoeffer retained a deep personal appreciation and respect for the aged scholar. He even considered majoring in church history under him, and on

Harnack's retirement delivered the congratulatory address on behalf of his students. There was a generous spirit at work here, certainly committed to a particular line but free from any strident, arrogant partisanship. As Eberhard Bethge says of Bonhoeffer at this stage: "His own upbringing and his father's example gave Bonhoeffer a broader perspective, enabling him to respect and learn from those who taught something different from what he believed."³⁰ For while Bonhoeffer was completely at one with Barth in affirming that it is only through his word in Jesus Christ that the hidden God makes himself known, he was also wanting to know just where and how this revelatory word is made real and accessible in the life that humans experience. Here is where he believed that philosophy, history, and—not least—sociology offered important resources for theology, even the astringent dialectical theology of the Barthians. A sound theology should be secure enough to know when it can make room for others.

So Bonhoeffer maintained a devoted yet critical engagement with his Berlin teachers, and not just Harnack. Prominent among them was the exponent of Martin Luther, Karl Holl (1866–1926). Bonhoeffer drew deeply from Holl's research into the original sources of the German reformer's teaching, which were just then creating a renewal of interest in Luther as distinct from what later Lutheranism had made of him. Bonhoeffer thus became thoroughly immersed in the wellspring of his own Protestant tradition—so much so that he took issue with Holl on an important aspect of the latter's interpretation of Luther. Holl argued that Luther's distinctive discovery was the inwardness of faith and the role of conscience in the believer's relation to God. To Bonhoeffer, this did not touch the radicality of Luther's view: faith looks away from itself and all its own feelings—even including that of conscience—to the God whose grace is *extra nos*, other than us, coming to us from outside ourselves and all our feelings, however pious. Also important to him was Reinhold Seeberg (1859–1935), professor of systematic theology, who laid great stress on the sociality of human existence, and it was under Seeberg that in 1925 Bonhoeffer decided he would write his doctoral thesis.

This brings us to the intellectual heart of Bonhoeffer's ecumenical formation. In choosing *Sanctorum Communio*—"The Communion of

Saints”—as the title of his doctoral thesis, he was taking up the theme which had begun to excite him in Rome: the church. But he was to approach it in a quite novel way, combining a theology of revelation through the word of God with the sociological tools he was learning about in his Berlin studies—one might almost say it was an attempt to yoke together, of all people, Karl Barth and Ernst Troeltsch. That he completed the dissertation in just two years and at the age of 21 is some cause for wonder. Nearly 30 years later, Barth was to praise the book highly and even hailed it as a “theological miracle.”³¹ Unsurprisingly for such a youthful enterprise, it manifests both high sophistication and some rough-hewn or incomplete arguments, but it is now widely recognized as foundational for an understanding of much of his later thought. A full exposition of the book will not be attempted here, simply enough to demonstrate that in working out his understanding of the church Bonhoeffer was, perhaps barely consciously at the time, arguing the ecumenical case.

“In this study,” Bonhoeffer begins, “social philosophy and sociology are employed in the service of theology.”³² It is not therefore an attempt to derive a theology from social science; rather, it seeks to describe the social form of the church which is in keeping with its theological self-understanding as the body of Christ, bearing in mind that “*the concepts of person, community, and God* are inseparably and essentially interrelated.”³³ First of all drawing upon much of the personalist social philosophy of the time,³⁴ Bonhoeffer lays out a decidedly relational view of human existence. Self-consciousness only arises in community: “By recognizing a You, a being of alien consciousness, I recognize myself as an ‘I,’ and so my self-consciousness awakens.”³⁵ One can be oneself only through being in the other. The theological question is how community and relationality are realized in the church. To describe the church as the body of Christ is of course a theological commonplace on any reading of the Pauline letters. But Bonhoeffer makes a quite daring leap beyond the usual view of the church as the community which believes in God’s self-revelation in Christ. The church is itself that revelation *having taken concrete, earthly, human social form*. Hence his most famous sentence in the thesis: *Die Kirche ist Christus als Gemeinde existierend*: “The church is Christ existing as

Gemeinde.”³⁶ *Gemeinde* is generally understood as German for “community,” that is, as a grouping formed by interpersonal bonds and a conscious sense of shared belonging, as distinct from the more impersonal “society” or “association,” and it can also denote “parish” or “congregation.” In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer uses it in relation to “church” with a range of such allusions and references although never as “community” in a completely undefined sense. Hence the preferred rendering of *Gemeinde* in the now-standard English translation of *Sanctorum Communio* as “church-community.”³⁷ Bonhoeffer is not saying that wherever some form of human community is found (however “genuine”!), there is Christ. Neither is he saying that any institution bearing the name “church” can be assumed to be where Christ is present as community. The church is the community that lives under the word of God in Christ and is defined by that word; the word is not defined by the church but the church by the word. But the word desires to take social form and that is the theological foundation of the church.

What makes the church distinctive among other forms of human community is therefore a matter of how its members are related to one another in a common life, as Christ-existing-as-community. The nature of these relationships is defined and enabled solely by Christ, which leads us to another of Bonhoeffer’s key terms, one which recurs repeatedly throughout his theological writings: *Stellvertretung*. A conventional English translation of this would be “action as representative or deputy.” Bonhoeffer, however, invests it with deeper meaning by using it to describe the saving work of Christ, Christ who vicariously bears the sins of others. If somewhat clumsy, the rendering in the most recent translations of Bonhoeffer does it more justice: “vicarious representative action.”³⁸ This both describes the work of Christ and indicates the relationships between members of his body, relationships which are of love, not just in a conventional form of nice goodwill, but of bearing one another’s burdens and sufferings and, most specifically, in forgiving one another’s sins and in intercessory prayer. Here, in fact, Bonhoeffer is following most closely Martin Luther:

Bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). The possibility of this 'being with one another' does not rest on human will. It exists only in the community of saints, and goes beyond the ordinary sense of 'being-with-one-another'. It belongs to the sociological structure of the church-community. In the *Tesseradecas* Luther expounds his thoughts on this point with incomparable beauty. My burden is borne by the others, their strength is my strength, in my fear and trembling the faith of the church comes to my aid. And even when I come to die, I should be confident that not I, or at least not I alone, am dying, but that Christ and the community of saints are suffering and dying with me. We walk the path of suffering and death accompanied by the whole church.³⁹

The church is therefore identified by the Christ-formed, vicarious relationality of its members to one another—which at its most specific yet most profound level is expressed in the forgiveness of sins. Church is therefore a relational community of persons, "being-with-each-other" and "being-for-each-other."⁴⁰ It is not a "religious community" or association. It is *Christus praesens*, the present Christ in his word and sacrament and in the relationships of vicarious representative action that he establishes by his own such action in the forgiveness of sins. It is therefore not a manifestation of "religion," for it is nothing less than *the new humanity*, in contrast to the old humanity in Adam.

Although completed six years before the advent of Hitler and the onset of the Church Struggle, *Sanctorum Communio* lays out several key weapons for Bonhoeffer to wield in the coming conflict. That the church is *Christ*—not the national spirit or the Aryan race—existing as community is an obvious example. That Christ exists as *community* formed the basis for the underground seminary life he established at Finkenwalde and its exposition in *Life Together*. But equally, *Sanctorum Communio* sets the compass for his ecumenical venturing. His identification of the church as the relational community under the word, Christ existing as church-community, gives him the freedom to range widely over the scenery of Christian traditions with a combination of generous appreciation and respectful criticism. The essential church can be looked for wherever the word of God is preached and where

Christ takes shape in its community. All else is relative. He writes as a Lutheran—the church is under the word—but not as an advocate of Lutheranism over against all other traditions. In *Sanctorum Communio*, he rejects on both theological and sociological grounds the significance of the famous distinction made by Ernst Troeltsch between “church” and “sect” types of Christianity:⁴¹ so long as it has the word, the sect no less than the church is the “community of Christ.”⁴² His critique of Roman Catholicism is firm but measured, as when, following an exposition of how each member of the church-community is called to be “a Christ to the other,” he asks:

But do we not come alarmingly close here to the Roman Catholic teaching of the treasury of merits that stands at the center of all more recent Roman Catholic views on the *sanctorum communio*? We are indeed, and do so quote consciously. With Luther we want to be sure that the sound core . . . is preserved in Protestant theology. The decisive difference lies in the fact that we do not acknowledge any person as having overflowing merits that could be used on behalf of another. The ‘treasury of merits’ is God’s love that in Christ created the church-community; it is nothing else.⁴³

Roman Catholic teaching and practice are a rationalization of “the irrational fact that human beings can never do more than they ought” and that within the church-community, as Luther says, God lets each person “enjoy” the other. The Catholic teaching is thus to be regarded as distortion of a basal truth—which by implication Protestantism itself is in danger of forgetting. Bonhoeffer recognizes the clear distinction between the Roman Catholic and Protestant concepts of the church—the former linking the Spirit and ecclesiastical office, the latter assuming the connection between Spirit and church-community as a whole.⁴⁴ But this is not the final conclusion, for

It is the miracle of the divine promise that wherever the word of God is proclaimed, it will create a church-community through its own power. Within the Roman Catholic church, as a place where God’s word is proclaimed, we therefore must assume the existence

of such a church-community that belongs together with the Protestant and sectarian church-communities.⁴⁵

Where the Catholic church may be judged to have failed is not on the question of its having the word, but on the purity of its doctrine and the consequent compulsory nature of its sociological structure. But even here matters are relative: "That there is a quest for pure doctrine is just as self-evident as the fact that no church can claim to possess it fully." At this point Bonhoeffer even dares to criticize, of all things, that touchstone of Lutheran orthodoxy, the Augsburg Confession!

We must consider the Augsburg Confession to be in error when, in Article 7, it links *recte docetur* [being rightly taught] to the *congregatio sanctorum* [congregation of saints]. . . . The community of saints will no doubt always strive for pure doctrine; but through historical circumstances this effort can remain ineffective. We are therefore bound to believe and acknowledge that in principle the *sanctorum communio* is present both in the Roman Catholic church and in the sect.⁴⁶

Memories of St Peter's and of the Baptist church in Trastevere were evidently operative here. Likewise, while defending the value of the *Volkskirche* or "church of the people," he also acknowledges the need in principle for the voluntary church, which is indeed the essential nature of the church,⁴⁷ and which circumstances (as was to happen in 1933) may at any time drive to the forefront. *Sanctorum Communio* thus manifests a readiness to search for and find the essential church, Christ as existing as church-community, within a diversity of ecclesiastical forms and in a variety of historical contexts. It is written in a spirit transcending the boundaries of the existing traditions.

There is only one point in *Sanctorum Communio* where Bonhoeffer explicitly mentions the matter of unifying the churches. He notes:

It is particularly important not to forget that unification from below is not identical with unity given from above; further, we must also remember that the will to unify should be practiced, first of all, in the smaller and even the smallest congregation. The way toward unification, however, is fraught with the fiercest resistance; for the stronger the will, the more partisan individuals behave. However, there will presumably be a basic goal that can be built upon and that provides a relative unity. And this common goal may be assumed in the church even where it cannot yet be formulated, but a conceptual expression is still being sought. In spite of recognizing that we can never achieve the absolute unanimity that would correspond to the unity of Spirit, the will seeking the greatest possible realization of unanimity will be alive in the church, and will take comfort from the prayer of Jesus, "that they may all be one, just as you Father are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). And it will be to the honor of the church-community to praise through its unity the glory of Jesus before the world (v. 23).⁴⁸

Bonhoeffer's chief concern here, as elsewhere in *Sanctorum Communio*, is to safeguard the proper place and freedom of the individual person in his or her relation with others in face of an abstract notion of "community" which effectively suppresses individuality and diversity. Likewise, faith in the church is very different from "romantic feelings of solidarity between kindred spirits."⁴⁹ Faith experiences the church "where there is no other link between the individuals than that of the community that exists within the church; where Jew and Greek, pietists and liberal, come into conflict, and nevertheless in unity confess their faith, come together to the Lord's Table, and intercede for one another in prayer."⁵⁰ By contrast, says Bonhoeffer harshly, the "communal impulses of the Youth Movement," such a feature of Germany at the time, have been great but have not added to the experience of the church.

We shall have cause to refer again to *Sanctorum Communio* at several later points along Bonhoeffer's ecumenical journey. For the present, it has been shown that with its emphasis on the relationality of human life and on the essential nature of the church as

Christ-existing-as-community, the logic of an ecumenical commitment was being laid out. Here is an ecclesiology which is intrinsically ecumenical, in contrast to those understandings of the church to which “ecumenical considerations” come as extras, or as preliminary thoughts which are then forgotten in the desire to secure a confessional identity. Put more dynamically, here was a vision about human life and the church in particular which was to drive its author into the ecumenical movement, and not only into it but through it to the point where he was to call for the church to discover a wholly new relation to the *oikoumene*.

The Spanish Experience: Barcelona 1928–1929

Bonhoeffer successfully defended his doctoral thesis *Sanctorum Communio* in December 1927. A brilliant academic career was now in prospect. But it was also to the pastorate that he felt called, and while working on his dissertation he had also been preparing for the theologian examinations for ordination in the Church of Berlin-Brandenburg. This included practical work such as teaching in Sunday school. His experience of the wider world, however, was about to be widened again thanks to Max Diestel, superintendent of Bonhoeffer’s church district in Berlin and a committed ecumenist. Diestel recommended Bonhoeffer for the post of assistant pastor in the German congregation at Barcelona, and he willingly accepted, spending 12 months there from February 1928. While once again in a Mediterranean Catholic environment, this proved in many ways a contrasting experience to Rome three years earlier, as well as to his native Berlin. After he had been settled in Barcelona for some time, Diestel wrote to him:

The problem is often, especially among us theologians, that we grow up much too academically and much too unworldly, and then our view of the real world, a world oriented quite differently, ends up being shortsighted. For this reason I also think it quite good that you are dealing with a completely different kind of congregation in Spain than we have here. . . . I can imagine . . . that it would also

be interesting for you if, once you have learned to speak Spanish fluently, you might have some contact with authentic Spanish life itself.⁵¹

Bonhoeffer needed little encouragement. He had plenty of opportunity to enjoy the country and pursue his intellectual interests, although his energies were of necessity largely focussed on the parochial—in every sense—life of the German congregation and to some extent the wider expatriate German community. For the sophisticated and cultured Berliner, this self-enclosed world of small businessmen and their families with their often petty and gossipy concerns was a strange and constricting environment. But it was one to which he gave himself unreservedly, not only in pastoral visiting and preaching but in developing new youth work and presenting a series of lectures on Christianity and vital contemporary issues. Relating to such a community provided a test of Bonhoeffer's capacity to empathize with a hitherto unknown context as it actually was and what it felt it needed, and in this he was patently successful. If the horizons of his flock were restricted he sought to widen, not mock, them. He was greatly liked by the congregation, its young people especially, and they wished him to stay longer—even if the pastor Friedrich Olbricht showed some signs of insecurity at his younger colleague's popularity.

Olbricht gave him little encouragement to relate to Spanish Catholicism, which in any case proved something of a disappointment. In contrast to the Italian expression it was, Bonhoeffer judged, the most gloomy form of the faith. Small wonder, he felt, that the bullfight with its passion and drama was so popular (Bonhoeffer's own enjoyment of the brutal spectacle disconcerted his family). More impressive was the scene he had witnessed when, en route to Barcelona, during a stopover in Paris he attended high mass in *Sacré Coeur* and noted the Montmartre prostitutes and their men at worship, "and once again one could see quite clearly how close, precisely through their fate and guilt, these most heavily burdened people are to the heart of the gospel."⁵² Nevertheless, in Barcelona Bonhoeffer was struck by the social egalitarianism of the street cafés and the Spanish dislike of all pretentiousness. He spent some hours each week working

in the office of the German welfare society, meeting all kinds of cases of need, homelessness, penury, fecklessness, or delinquency. As in Rome, he was joined by his brother Klaus for a time and they journeyed to admire the ancient grandeurs of the south of the country, and also briefly crossed to Morocco.

If Spain was a scene with which, unlike Italy, a German of his background felt little affinity, it was still one that interested him enormously and which he felt had to be appreciated from within. Embedded as it was in its own particular historical experience and culture, Bonhoeffer allowed Spain to challenge his own presuppositions. Not long after arriving in Barcelona, he confessed to his brother-in-law Walter Dress that in Spain, "a country that has known neither war nor revolution, neither a youth movement nor Spengler," he felt that "one really finds oneself forced to reassess one's theology from the ground up."⁵³ Two months later he again writes to Dress, reflecting on all his new experiences: "You can see that I am glad to be here; and while it is certainly interesting to enter different circles than those to which one is accustomed, one must also add the joy of being in a foreign country and the adjustment to what seems to be an extremely alien culture for us, yet one that is certainly stimulating and serious."⁵⁴ Some of that stimulus became evident in his sermons and lectures to the German congregation. His own mind, pulled out of his home environment, was clearly expanding. This is perhaps not surprising, since, as commonly happens, in an expatriate circle "home" is invested with even more nationalist sentiment than at home itself. Some of his speech showed signs of a lingering, traditional German nationalism. In a lecture on Christian ethics, he expounds the very traditional Lutheran justification of war for the sake of the nation, and even: "Strength also comes from God, and power, and victory, for God creates youth in the individual as well as in nations, and God loves youth, for God himself is eternally young and strong and victorious. And fear and weakness will be conquered by courage and strength."⁵⁵ Yet not only were such ideas not to be heard from him ever again, but even at that very time they were being implicitly challenged by other notes being sounded, as in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:27 ("Now you are the body of Christ . . ."). The church is a people whose members love one

another because God loves them: "Not Germany and not France and not America, but a people extending over the entire world, whose members can be found here and there and everywhere—indeed it has and is yet seeking members among us! This is the people of God; this is the church of Christ."⁵⁶

In Spain, therefore, he was discovering more about the *oikoumene*, what it meant to live in strange parts of it, and was reflecting on what it meant to be the *sanctorum communio* of the whole inhabited earth. It was during this time that he started to dream of going far beyond Europe altogether and visiting India. Returning to Berlin via Geneva in February 1929 he visited the League of Nations to get information on the churches and the League and "the question of protection of children, minorities, and calendar reform."⁵⁷

Berlin Again—and America

While in Spain Bonhoeffer had already begun work on his postdoctoral thesis, which would qualify him to teach in university. Back home in Berlin this was his chief preoccupation until he submitted it in March 1930, under the title *Act and Being*. In effect, it was a follow-up to *Sanctorum Communio* but focussing on the question of how in Christ God's freedom is not so much a negative freedom from, but a gracious freedom *for* the world. Relationality remained to the fore in his thinking. Meanwhile, in the faculty he was employed as assistant in systematic theology, and following the satisfactory report on *Act and Being* gave his trial and inaugural lectures. Through all this he was also following the prescribed programme in practical theology leading toward ordination. His career seemed set on course, but as repeatedly happened in his life, a major diversion presented itself: this time, the possibility of a year in the USA as an exchange student at Union Theological Seminary, New York. Once again it was Max Diestel who was instrumental here, in securing the invitation through the German Academic Exchange Service and encouraging Bonhoeffer's acceptance.⁵⁸ Bonhoeffer sailed for New York in September 1930, returning at the end of June 1931.

Once again Bonhoeffer found himself in an environment quite unlike anything he had experienced before; or rather, one should say, in several very diverse environments in the land of the free. First there was Union Seminary itself, founded to serve the mainstream Protestant denominations, decidedly progressive and liberal in ethos and having on its faculty some of the most eminent contemporary names in American theology and church life, including Henry Sloane Coffin, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Adams Brown, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and the Scotsmen James Moffat and John Baillie. The intense yet informal conviviality typical of American college life was at first disconcerting to him. Still more so was the approach to theology with its largely humanistic, pragmatic assumptions: doctrine seemed to have been swallowed up in social ethics and behavioural science, the Bible largely lost sight of, Luther laughed at in class, and Barth hardly heard of. Such, at least, was the initial reaction of this sophisticated and perhaps prejudiced German. "There is no theology here," he wrote to Diestel after three months at Union.⁵⁹ He himself presented a seminar paper on Barth, prefaced with the warning that in order to understand Barth the listeners would have to give up all their preconceptions as to what theology was about. But even at his most negative Bonhoeffer was prepared to find seams of value in this unpromising mine. Niebuhr's classes on ethics, social analysis, and contemporary literature he found enlivening (and both Niebuhr and Baillie were to be important to him personally in the coming years). If at first he did not like what he met in American thought, he at least decided to study it in depth to understand more, and so he took private tutorials with Eugene Lyman, professor of philosophy of religion. Moreover, he valued greatly the courses on "The Church and Community" taught by C. C. Webber, which involved visits to social and political organizations in the city.

Second, there was the world of the Protestant Sunday and the illustrious pulpits of New York. Here again, he was not overly impressed. Popular preaching aimed to make the hearers feel optimistic about themselves, the world, and God rather than bring them in worship through fear and trembling to holy joy. The churches appeared to have succumbed to the mores of the business world. In a (Methodist) Sunday school, he noted with scorn, "a little girl recently received—right

in front of me—a makeup box as a reward for good attendance. And we're supposed to believe we're sitting in a Christian church.”⁶⁰ He preached in Methodist and Baptist churches, spoke to student conferences, and visited the conference of the Federal Council of Churches in Washington, D.C. If he was not impressed by easy-going theological liberalism, neither was he taken with the opposing fundamentalism which, while it might preserve some elements of Reformation views, also distorted them “by the crassest orthodoxy, especially in the Southern Baptist Church.”⁶¹ Fortunately, Bonhoeffer was not left just to the mercy of his European perspectives and instant reactions. At Union he began a close friendship with a doctoral student, Paul Lehmann, and his wife, Marion. In Lehmann, Bonhoeffer found a sympathetic understanding of his European thought-world, and in return Lehmann helpfully interpreted the American scene to him.

Indeed, Bonhoeffer made several important friendships at Union, and it was through one of them that he was able to make the most pivotal social discovery of his time in America. Frank Fisher was one of the few black students in the seminary, and he introduced Bonhoeffer to the huge Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Bonhoeffer was instantly impressed by the powerful preaching of the church's charismatic pastor Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the fervent worship of the congregation, and the church's prophetic social ministry in the ghetto. Here he found his spiritual home while in New York, and regularly taught a Sunday school class and led a women's Bible study group. “I heard the gospel preached in the Negro churches,” he later reported with gratification to Max Diestel.⁶² Nor was this simply an enjoyment of the exotic for its own sake. “During my overall stay in America I spent a great deal of time getting to know the Negro problem from every angle *and also observing white America from this rather hidden perspective.*”⁶³ He studied social-survey reports, visited leaders of the young black movement at Howard College in Washington, read novels by contemporary black writers, ostentatiously walked out of restaurants in protest when his friend Fisher was refused service, and on his return to Germany took home a collection of records of spirituals. At home the “Jewish question” was beginning to stir as antisemitism became politically voluble and at times violent. New York was putting

him through an important process of conscientization on race, vital not only in understanding the American context but also in alerting him to the sinister trends on his home scene.

Friendships with two fellow Europeans at Union also became significant. Erwin Sutz, a Swiss, had studied under Barth and so readily made common theological cause with Bonhoeffer (and later helped to introduce him personally to Barth). Jean Lasserre of the French Reformed Church on two counts presented a more challenging possibility for a relationship, which in the end proved transformative. First, never until now had Bonhoeffer come into close relationship with a representative of the former enemy nation. Twelve years after the war, the emotional scars were still real on both sides, and above all for Germans who were still smarting under the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty with its imputation to Germany of sole guilt for the war. Bonhoeffer and his family shared that sense of injustice.⁶⁴ Second, Lasserre was a convinced pacifist, the first such that Bonhoeffer had really met and engaged with. Bonhoeffer found that his traditional Lutheran view of military action as justified by national need, still so evident in his Barcelona lectures, and the conventional interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount ("turn the other cheek") as words to be taken symbolically and not literally, were now challenged. He started to think seriously about the command of Christ as one to be obeyed concretely, and to face the pacifist option. He was in any case seeing himself as a kind of German peace envoy in America. Several times he addressed youth and student gatherings about the longing of German young people for peace, speaking frankly and with great passion of German feelings during and after the war, of the death of his brother Walter, and the bitter privations caused by the blockade that followed the armistice. Here was no anodyne, forgive-and-forget attitude but, rather, a belief that reconciliation requires the exposure of suffering and grief on all sides. But he also looks to the future:

Returning to the Christian point of view, it seems to me one of the greatest tasks for our church, to strengthen the work of peace in every country and in the whole world. It must never more happen, that a Christian people fights against a Christian people, brother

against brother, since both have one Father. Our churches have already begun this international work. But more important than that is . . . that every Christian man and woman takes seriously the great idea of the unity of Christianity, above all personal and national desires, of the one Christian people in the whole world, of the brotherhood of mankind, of the charity, about which Paul says . . .⁶⁵

Bonhoeffer's American experience, it should be said, went well beyond New York, and even the USA. It took in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia (where he had relatives), Chicago, the deep South, and over to Cuba where he and Erwin Sutz spent Christmas 1930 with the sister of Käthe Horn, the Bonhoeffer children's governess; and just before his return to Europe he and Jean Lasserre, accompanied part of the way by Paul Lehmann and Erwin Sutz, made it by car to Mexico.

Bonhoeffer concluded his long and detailed American report to Max Diestel with surprising diffidence as to what he had learned there "for our situation," and warned against looking for any "direct application." Rather, he said, "It is simply no more and no less than that one has begun to become acquainted with a different part of the world."⁶⁶ Perhaps this diffidence was because Bonhoeffer knew that something very significant but of a rather different kind than could be set down on paper was happening to him while in America. It was not just a further accumulation of experiences, of interesting encounters, nor even of new understandings about societies and churches, though all these played a role. It was a change in his self-consciousness, of who he understood himself to be in the world as he was now perceiving it. German, Protestant, and theologian he still certainly was. But something else had been added, a new way of identifying himself, which marked a qualitative change from how he had been still thinking of himself when in Barcelona. Being translated more radically than ever before out of his home, church, and European contexts into liberal "Anglo-Saxon" America, and still further into black America and its churches, had precipitated a quite new awareness of what it meant to be a Christian human person. It may be seen in the small but giveaway phrase "our church" in the words quoted above from his peace

lecture, with its recognition of a common task for peace to be taken up by all Christians in every part of the world.⁶⁷ In Barcelona, he could certainly talk about the worldwide church, the people of God. Now, he spoke as one who was consciously part of it—"our church"—and personally committed to its reconciling mission. The centre of gravity of his conscious identity had shifted decisively from the national and confessional to the worldwide Christian. "Christ existing as church-community" was now to be understood on a level not perceived before, and not only understood but lived as well.

Eleven years later, in 1942, Bonhoeffer wrote Max Diestel a congratulatory letter on his 70th birthday, full of gratitude for what he owed to him ever since the 1927 telephone call suggesting the Barcelona curacy "set my thinking on a track from which it has not yet deviated,"⁶⁸ that is, to ecumenical Christianity, followed by the year at Union Seminary "that has been of the greatest significance for me up to the present day." No less revealing is the remark in his letter to Eberhard Bethge written from Tegel prison in April 1944: "I don't think I've ever changed very much, except perhaps at the time of my first impressions abroad, and under the first conscious influence of Papa's personality. It was then that a turning from the phraseological to the real ensued."⁶⁹ The experience of home, and the experiences of being not-at-home, were indeed both vital in his nurturing. Bound up with this was what, as he later confided to a friend, was an inner change around the time in America, from being simply a theologian to becoming a praying Christian, one who read his Bible not just as an intellectual exercise but in order to hear God's word to him.⁷⁰ We do not know how, or if, Dietrich Bonhoeffer answered Hans Christoph von Hase's question on whether he had become an ecumenist, but certainly he had undergone an ecumenical formation by the time he sailed back to Germany from New York in June 1931. Awaiting him at home, moreover, was a summons not just to ecumenical interest, but to ecumenical responsibility as well. Diestel had yet further plans for him.