

Silences of Reverence and Collaboration

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“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.” Habakkuk 2:20

“When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

Revelation 8:1.

Many of us are familiar with the tradition of reverent silence in the scriptures. We know of the monastic tradition of silence, where some early fathers chose to remain silent for years as an act of submission and reverence. However, in the face of civil and human rights violations, silence is often far from reverent. Silences can become collaborative with the oppressive power by failing to speak out against the oppression of the power institution.

An example of collaborative silences

Martin Heidegger’s postwar silence about his Nazi past, including his membership in the Party and his rectorship at Freiburg University is an example of a silence that fails to be reverent. Heidegger’s friends and biographers have long established his connection with the Nazi party—he was a public Nazi and never tried to hide his party affiliation – and his openly expressed antisemitism¹. Immediately after the Holocaust, there was a flurry of writing and speaking, particularly by Heidegger’s fellow German philosophers, about the question of German guilt. They were explaining it, justifying it, apologizing for it, rationalizing it, coming to terms about it, yet from Heidegger there was only silence: “Heidegger spoke and wrote from the eye of the

¹ For example, in a May 1933 conversation with philosophical colleague Karl Jaspers, Heidegger claimed that “there really is a dangerous international fraternity of the Jews” (quoted in Lang 38).

hurricane, with many other voices around him saying loudly and often what he himself could join – answer – by his own silence” (Lang 76).

In other words, as Holocaust scholar D.G. Myers argues, an ethical response demands that one “abandon the powerful position of silence, for example – and acknowledge [another’s] claims upon my attention and concern” (275). Heidegger’s association with the Nazi government needed an explanation or apology to make the situation right². An event as catastrophic as the Holocaust warrants moral reflection and judgment, condemnation and punishment (Lang 14). Heidegger’s silence is collaborative because he refuses to respond to the Jewish Question following the Holocaust. His prolific writing and his philosophical treatises further implicate his silences. The fact that Heidegger is confronted with questions about his association with the Nazis, the plight of Jews in Germany during the Holocaust and remains silent indicate that his silence asserts collaboration with the Nazis. Whether his silence belies an intentional self-censoring in fear of a negative audience response or a guilt he could not live with, it refuses to name the Jews as persons, which is the foundational crime of the Nazi regime.

Answering the Jewish Question: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Response to Aryan Policies

This particular analysis and interpretation of Heidegger’s silence led me to reconsider my own analysis of another response to the antisemitic policies in Nazi Germany – Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s essay “The Church and the Jewish Question.” My initial analysis of Bonhoeffer’s treatise, which was founded only on Burke’s theory of

² Herbert Marcuse addresses Heidegger’s silence in a 1947 letter: “you are still identified with that Nazi regime. Many of us have long awaited a statement from you” (quoted in Lang 21). Instead of addressing Marcuse’s concerns and accusations, Heidegger replies: “To the serious legitimate charges you express ‘about a regime that murdered millions of Jews...’ I can merely add that if instead of ‘Jews’ you had written ‘East Germans,’ then the same holds true for one of the allies” (quoted in Lang 21).

rhetorical identification, was that Bonhoeffer attempts to create a rhetoric of resistance in this piece, but Lang's model for interpreting Heidegger's silence as well as the concepts of resistance and collaboration defined in this project complicate my initial conclusion. I now argue that this Bonhoeffer work is itself an example of collaborative silence.

Unlike Heidegger's silence Bonhoeffer's makes a response to the pressure of the rhetorical situation, but does not address the exigence fittingly. Because the treatise fails to speak to Hitlerian oppression, and instead exemplifies the encroaching antisemitism within the Lutheran Church, a study of its silences is necessary.

We are familiar with the events of 1933 in Germany. On January 30, 1933, Hitler rose to power; on April 1, 1933, the boycott against Jewish merchants began to be enforced by SS officers posted outside the doors; on April 7, legislation was passed that denied civil rights to Germans who were of Jewish descent; and in September church leaders elected Ludwig Muller, a Nazi sympathizer, as national bishop which led to the adoption of the Brown Synod adopting the Aryan clause into the church. Just as the discussion of the post-Holocaust Jewish Question demanded a response from Heidegger, the official boycott of Jewish businesses, expulsion of Jews from civil service, and adoption of "Aryan" and "non-Aryan" as legal terms, all of which occurred in April 1933, demanded a response from German citizens and theologians³.

Bonhoeffer's treatise "The Church and the Jewish Question" was an opportunity to change the tide of antisemitism in the church, to convince the church not to subscribe to the political inactivity that Luther prescribes. Instead he chose to reinforce it. Precisely

³ I am aware of the risk of looking at actions from the lens of 70 years and one that has seen the horrors of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis – events Bonhoeffer had not yet seen. Still, an examination of his silences opens up a discussion of times that our silences further human rights violations, even when we have not seen the whole picture.

because, unlike Heidegger, Bonhoeffer addressed the Jewish question but, like Heidegger, still refused to acknowledge the personhood of the Jews and name their name, his silence is the more haunting and equally collaborative.

The treatise was written in April 1933 for a discussion group of pastors as a response to the boycott against Jewish merchants and Aryan legislation passed by the Nazi government on April 7, 1933. The paper was apparently not distributed beyond this discussion group and not rediscovered until after 1945. When it was translated into English in the 1960s it found a worldwide audience and reopened the controversy regarding Bonhoeffer's position on the Jews.

Bonhoeffer's response to the "Law for the Re-establishment of the Professional Civil Service" has been seen as both the critical act of resistance in the Confessing Church and as an act of collaboration with Hitler. Several scholars have singled out the antisemitism within Bonhoeffer's treatise.

Now the measures of the state towards Judaism in addition stand in a quite special context for the church. The church of Christ has never lost the thought that the 'chosen people,' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering. (Bonhoeffer 226)

Scholars quote passages like this as evidence of Bonhoeffer's antisemitism. One such scholar, Eva Fleischner, in her book, Judaism in German Christian Theology since 1945, says of the above passage, "one could hardly find a more graphic illustration of how deeply the 'teaching of contempt' has taken root" (24). Other scholars, such as Stanley Rosenbaum, William Peck and Ruth Zerner, have also criticized Bonhoeffer's

antisemitism. Careful study of Bonhoeffer's document reveals that the treatise is not concerned about the treatment of the Jews under Nazism at all, but rather the refusal of the Evangelical Church to resist what Bonhoeffer saw as the political oppression of the Churches by the Nazi regime. That is, the antisemitism runs even more deeply than the earlier scholars realized or were prepared to admit. Bonhoeffer's refusal to address the suffering of the Jews and his weak call to the church to act beyond the suffering of Christian Jews is a refusal to speak the name of the Jews and acknowledge them as persons. His refusal is collaborative silence because, like Hitler, he refuses to see the Jews as equal participants in the church or the state. Instead of speaking the name of the Jews as an act of resistance, he denies them personhood in his silence.

My interpretation of the purpose of the treatise is supported by a) the audience to whom the treatise was addressed, b) the internal rhetorical strategies that Bonhoeffer used to argue his points, and c) the exigence of the situation within which he wrote. By examining these three dimensions in some detail, I demonstrate that Bonhoeffer falls short in his effort to change the church and resist the Nazis, only reinforces the antisemitism of the Lutheran church and further exclude the Jews from full participation.

The treatise, which is not particularly long, is framed by quotations from Luther, framed with antisemitism and inactivity. Instead of changing the existing beliefs of the audience, Bonhoeffer uses Luther's quotes to reinforce them. The beginning quotations⁴

⁴ The two quotations that Bonhoeffer cites are: Luther 1546 " 'We would still show them the Christian doctrine and ask them to turn and accept the Lord whom they should by rights have honoured before we did' ...'Where they repent, leave their usury, and accept Christ, we would gladly regard them as our brothers.'" Luther 1523 "If the Apostles, who were also Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles deal with the Jews, there would have been no Christians among the Gentiles. But seeing that they have acted in such a brotherly way towards us, we in turn should act in a brotherly way towards the Jews in case we might convert some. For ourselves we are not yet fully their equals, much less their superiors...But now we use force against them...what good will we do them with that? Similarly, how will we benefit

address Luther's position towards the Jew, and the final quotation⁵ addresses the Christian's role in the world. Bonhoeffer invokes these quotations to set the stage for his argument and preview his collaboration by only considering Jews as theological abstractions rather than human beings. The treatise is structured in much the same way – beginning with Bonhoeffer addressing the Jewish question and culminating in a discussion of the Christian's role in an oppressive state. The document, as Bonhoeffer lays it out, is centered on two problems he poses in the form of questions. The first is “what is the church's attitude to this action by the state? And what should the church do as a result of it?” and second, “what attitude should the church take to its members who are baptized Jews?” (Bonhoeffer 222). Although the context for this document is clearly the Nazi discriminatory laws disabling the Jews, that is merely a jumping off point for Bonhoeffer. The focus, as the above questions reveal, is on the Church's attitudes and the Church's actions.

Bonhoeffer begins the essay by summarizing the established Lutheran view of the Church's responsibility for action to the state. He says, “without a doubt, the Church of the Reformation has no right to address the state directly in its specifically political action” (222). Following this statement is a series of statements that affirm this belief.

The church

has neither to praise or censure the laws of the state, but must rather affirm

the state to be God's order of preservation in a godless world; it has to

them by forbidding them to live and work and have other human fellowship with us, thus driving them to practice usury?”

⁵ This quotation for Luther ends the treatise: Luther on Psalm 110:3 “There is no other rule or test for who is a member of the people of God or the church of Christ than this: where there is a little band of those who accept this word of the Lord, teach it purely and confess against those who persecute it, and for that reason suffer what is their due.”

recognize the state's ordinances, good or bad as they appear from a humanitarian point of view... the action of the state remains free from the church's intervention... history is not made by the church, but by the state. (222)

These are all statements that his audience agreed with and would not question – primarily based upon Luther's beliefs regarding the need for the church to abstain from political action. Bonhoeffer's rhetoric in the passage affirms the idea that Christians should not confront the state. Unless it concerns them directly, as with the denial of rights to the church, they should remain collaboratively silent. In other words, Lutheran tradition encouraged collaborative silence. Bonhoeffer extends the traditional encouragement to the Nazi's treatment of the Jews. However, rather than encouraging the church to act to end the oppression of German Jews, Bonhoeffer discusses resistance on a philosophical basis, whereby Christians should reconsider the action of the state, as Bonhoeffer does in this treatise, but not act to change the state.

Although Bonhoeffer offers the church three options as response, he does not offer a plan of action, or specifically address the situation of German Jews. They can (1) place the responsibility for change on the state; the church can “ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as state, i.e. it can throw the state back on its responsibilities” (225). The church also (2) can “aid the victims in state action” (225), since the church has an unconditional obligation to the victims of any society, “even if they do not belong to the Christian community” (225). Or the church (3) can take responsibility for change itself. The third option is “not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself” (225). Although

Bonhoeffer does endorse the first two responses, the final action is clearly the action for which Bonhoeffer argues because the first two responses are already within the realm of acceptable church action, since the “church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks” (225). The final action is, of course, direct political action, but it is “possible and desirable when the church sees the state fail in its function of creating law and order, i.e. when it sees the state unrestrainedly bring about too much or too little law and order” (225).

Bonhoeffer then he addresses the issue of non-Aryan discrimination. Bonhoeffer is performing the same rhetorical process when he discusses the second concern of his essay – the situation of Jews in Germany. Bonhoeffer begins by stating his antisemitic belief about the Jews: “the church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the ‘chosen people’, who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross, must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering” (226). Like the role of the church in relation to the state, the position of Christians in relation to Jews is drawn from Luther. Bonhoeffer cites a passage from Luther that appears to be less antisemitic: “Jews are the poorest people among all nations upon earth, they are tossed to and fro, they are scattered here and there in all lands, they have no certain place where they could remain safely and must always be afraid that they will be driven out” (226). Still, Bonhoeffer sees them as less important than Christians and the position of the church. He reminds the church that the final homecoming of the Jews is their conversion to Christ, and in light of this the Christian church is to see the Jews’ history “with trembling as God’s own free, fearful way with his people” (226), again considering the Jews not as persons who exist for their own right, instead, considering only how Jews exist in relation to the church. He argues

that they should not suffer because they are still God's people: "it is known that no nation of the world can be finished with this mysterious people, because God is not yet finished with it" (226-27). Here Bonhoeffer does not view Jews as human beings at all; since God is not finished with them, they are only theological symbols.

Bonhoeffer continues to belie his antisemitism when, like Heidegger, he uses false analogy. He compares the suffering of the Jews to the suffering of Christians and by doing so, undermines the persecution of the Jews. As the church "looks at the rejected people, it humbly recognizes itself as a church continually unfaithful to its Lord and looks full of hope to those of the people of Israel who have come home, to those who have come to believe in the one true God in Christ, and knows itself to be bound to them in brotherhood" (227). Here Bonhoeffer only really considers Christians of Jewish descent, not Jewish people as a whole. The church is first to understand itself as a people who have made mistakes in the same way as the Jews. They are to find solidarity in having both, at times, disappointed the Lord. Then the church is advised to look to the Jews in the church and identify with them in order to be able to view the Jews with hope. This typing and historicizing of Jewish oppression distances the very real and very frightening current context of their oppression. Once again, Bonhoeffer does not ask the church to identify with the Jews as people but to look at them as symbols of oppression.

Bonhoeffer argues that the 'Jewish problem' is different for the church and the state. For the state, it is an issue of race, but for the church "Judaism is never a racial concept, but a religious one" (227). Here Bonhoeffer relates the situation in Germany to the of the early church's problems between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. This difference led to the first division of the church into Jewish Christianity and Gentile

Christianity at the Apostolic Council; “this cleavage was regarded on both sides partly as intolerable heresy, partly as tolerable schism” (228). If the church of Bonhoeffer’s day allowed itself to get caught up in these arguments, then it risked legalism of the Jewish Christians – not baptized Jews, but people who let “membership of the people of God, the church of Christ, be determined by the observance of a divine law. In contrast, the Gentile Christian knows no presupposition for membership of the people of God, the church of Christ, but the call of God by his Word in Christ” (228). Therefore, these communities, Bonhoeffer asserts, must not split – “such an exclusion thus remains impossible for the church” (228). Bonhoeffer shows the Christians what is at stake for the church of Christ if they allow the state and its ideology to affect the doctrines of the church. The church would be split and the racial unity of the church would be raised to the status of law and would fulfill a presupposition for church membership, thus succumbing to the legalism of the early Jewish Christians. Therefore, for the minister of Christ, the question of whether Jew and German “stand together under the Word of God” (229) becomes the proof of whether a body is a church or not. Those people who cannot tolerate fellowship with Christians of Jewish-descent may separate themselves from church fellowship. Bonhoeffer’s concern is for the sovereignty of the church, not the problem of the German Jew. He is concerned about how the Nazi legislation affects the future of the church, not the livelihood of the persecuted.

Bonhoeffer’s treatise does not specifically address the Nazi oppression of Jews in Germany and does not make his position clear. While his subsequent actions of resistance, such as his assassination plot on Hitler or his refusal to abandon the church in Germany to escape to safety, may express his commitment to the church in Germany as

well as the Jewish people, Bonhoeffer's rhetorical strategies do not address the role of the church in political resistance and protection excuses the church from action and are a refusal to acknowledge the Jews as persons and speak their suffering. In doing so he undermines the suffering of the Jewish people and serves as a model of collaboration for the church. He argues that "no one who feels unable to tolerate church fellowship with Christians of Jewish race can be prevented from separating himself from this church fellowship" (229).

As a result of his collaborative silence and his subsequent resistance, Bonhoeffer has had both his critics and his admirers. The problem is that Bonhoeffer is either seen as an antisemite or as a martyred saint. For example, in their introduction to a collection of Bonhoeffer's works, Kelly and Nelson claim that "Bonhoeffer left the world an example of courage and a theological legacy with few parallels" (xiii). There has been little scholarship that examines both sides of Bonhoeffer's life, his challenges, his shortcomings and his successes. In 1996 when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum held a ceremony honoring Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi as "righteous gentiles who helped to save Jews" the invitation acknowledged the tensions in honoring Bonhoeffer. "Although repudiating Nazism, Bonhoeffer also expressed the anti-Jewish bias of centuries-old Christian teaching" (quoted in Zerner 195). In Ethics, which was written while Bonhoeffer was in prison for resisting the Nazis, Bonhoeffer himself realizes his collaboration and confesses it. He says, "I am guilty of cowardly silence when I ought to have spoken. I am guilty of hypocrisy and untruthfulness in the face of force. I have been lacking in compassion and I have denied

the poorest of my brethren”(113). He admits to denying even that they were brethren.

Bonhoeffer also confesses the sins of the church, which

has stood by while violence and wrong were being committed under cover of this name...[which is] guilty towards the *countless victims of calumny*, denunciation, and defamation...by her own silence she has rendered herself guilty of the decline in responsible action, in bravery in the defense of a cause, and in willingness to suffer for what is known to be right. (114-15, my emphasis)

Even in this confession, Bonhoeffer demonstrates his collaborative silences by refusing to name Jews but calls them “victims.” There are, however, times when Bonhoeffer emerges from his collaborative silence and resists the oppression of the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer’s response to the Jewish Question is a refusal to answer. Like the Nazis, he will not speak the name of the Jews as persons. His silence collaborates with the Nazi’s position towards the Jews: they are not people who are fit to be part of this institution. Like Heidegger, when Bonhoeffer breaks his silence on the Jews, it is only to undermine their suffering and to strengthen their persecution. In order to resist Nazi oppression, Bonhoeffer would have to question the history of antisemitism within the Lutheran church and offer a full identification with the Jews.

Mordecai to Esther, “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s household will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this.” (Esther 4:14).

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