

# A Voice for All Ages

BY KRISTA TIPPETT (@KRISTATIPPETT), HOST /  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

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I first read Dietrich Bonhoeffer in college. And because of the way he grappled with religion by way of politics, I was able to find him intriguing and respectable then in my 20s, years when I was a thoroughly a-religious person. A pastor and a pacifist during the rise of the Third Reich, he became involved in the July 20, 1944 plot to kill Hitler. The son of a sophisticated German family, he was ultimately executed by a German system of terror. But before he died, he brought creative, challenging theology into the world. In my radio life now, Bonhoeffer's name punctuates my conversations with vastly different religious people. It recurs almost as a refrain and in unlikely places. I've heard him cited, for example, by whistleblowing FBI special agent Coleen Rowley, by the Jewish biologist Robert Pollack, and by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

Bonhoeffer became an acclaimed theologian as a very young man, before the rise of fascism, writing about ethics, biblical faith, and the nature of Christian community. For a time before his arrest by the Nazis, he created and led a community, Finkenwalde, meant to be a countervailing force to the fascist co-option of Christian tradition in Hitler's Germany. But *Letters and Papers from Prison* is his most famous popular work. Bonhoeffer's friend, colleague, and nephew Eberhard Bethge collected his varied writings from prison and turned them into a manuscript. This sent Bonhoeffer's voice into the world beyond his death and allowed his ideas and example to evolve in our time. At the center of Bonhoeffer's writing from prison is an acknowledgement that the Church — and indeed religion itself — fails at its own highest aspirations. But Bonhoeffer doesn't want to let God go for the lamentable failings of human beings and institutions created in their image. He insists, even as he faces death, that Christianity brings essential questions and insights into the world — insights which the world needs, and which it will constantly reinvent and rename even as leaders and institutions betray them. "Reconciliation and redemption," he wrote in one letter, "regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship — all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture anymore to speak of them.

In the traditional acts and words we suspect that there may be something quite new and revolutionary, though we cannot as yet grasp or express it." Bonhoeffer predicted the onset of what he called "religionless Christianity." That is certainly one way to describe the sensibility of modern Europe and in many real ways of Western political and popular culture as a whole. But Bonhoeffer's insight into the deepest appeal of religious language and ideas was also prophetic. In our time, there is a hunger for spiritual thought, even for theology, that does not necessarily result in full houses of worship but expresses and quantifies itself in manifold ways, including religious and spiritual book sales, internet resources, and movie themes.

How I would love to interview Bonhoeffer himself, to hear his thoughts and his prescription for our time. Without betraying the essence of Christian faith — such as the unsentimental yet practical love of enemies Bonhoeffer practiced even in the prison in which he died — how can our largely Christian-oriented country mobilize its deepest values to counter forces of terror? How and when do we decide, as Bonhoeffer did, that faith demands violence and how can we know when the pursuit of peace must override security? And how would Scripture and theology, as Bonhoeffer understood them, speak to healing and redressing the bitter divisions in our domestic political life? By way of Martin Doblmeier, we are able to end this program with the voice of Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's nephew, friend, and posthumous editor. Doblmeier interviewed Bethge shortly before he died. It is thrilling to hear Bethge repeat words that emboldened me even in the years in which I was defiantly not a religious person, words that retain their power for people of faith, to be sure, but that also inspire the secular among us. These words provide as intriguing a glimpse as we have, perhaps, of how Bonhoeffer himself would have participated wholeheartedly in a "religionless" age. He penned them in a letter to his friend Bethge in July, 1944:

"I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world. That, I think, is faith."

<https://onbeing.org/blog/krista-tippett-a-voice-for-all-ages/>

Krista's podcast: "Ethics and the Will of God: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" – an interview with Martin Doblmeier, the producer of the PBS documentary, *Bonhoeffer*, can be found at this link:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/martin-doblmeier-ethics-and-the-will-of-god-the-legacy-of-dietrich-bonhoeffer/>

or by going to: <http://onbeing.org/> and searching for "Bonhoeffer"