

## A Cautious Embrace: Jewish Responses to Bonhoeffer

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Peter Novick argues in *The Holocaust in American Life* that “the Holocaust” as it exists in the American imagination is a cultural phenomenon with a particular history.

According to Novick, the destruction of European Jewry as a distinct species of Nazi crime did not reach public awareness in America until the mid-1960s. A similar dynamic can be detected in Christian theology, particularly studies of twentieth-century German theologians. For instance, while Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) has been a focus of scholarly interest since shortly after his death at the hands of the Nazis, “the Jews” were barely discernible in studies of Bonhoeffer before 1965.<sup>1</sup> Since that time Bonhoeffer Studies reflects a steady evolution of interest in this topic.

Along with the Holocaust’s gradual emergence into public consciousness, other factors have been responsible for generating interest in Bonhoeffer’s relationship to the Jewish people since the 1960s. Among these are the initiation of genuine efforts to grapple with the Christian beliefs and attitudes that made the Holocaust possible, developments in the historiography of the German Church Struggle (which during the 1960s underwent a revisionist shift and began to acknowledge and explore the less heroic aspects of the church’s career under Nazism),<sup>2</sup> the English publication of *No Rusty Swords* in 1965, a collection of texts from Bonhoeffer’s pen during the German Church Struggle, and the German publication of Eberhard Bethge’s definitive biography in 1967.

Another reason “the Jews” have remained on the agenda of Bonhoeffer Studies is

that beginning in 1960 Jewish scholars have offered a series of brief but provocative interpretations of Bonhoeffer's life and writings. These analyses have emerged from various concerns and do not represent a consensus; but it is possible to view them as a series of adjustments to the cautious embrace offered by Jewish scholars during the 1960s.

*Steven S. Schwarzschild*

The first Jewish scholars to take notice of Bonhoeffer were not concerned primarily with how he understood Jews, but with how Jews ought to understand him. Among the earliest to address this question was Steven S. Schwarzschild (1924-1989), whose 1960 survey of liberal Protestant theological literature in *Judaism* dedicated considerable space to Bonhoeffer. Schwarzschild observed that “Jews owe it to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to become acquainted with his theology”—not only because he was an “early opponent” and “true blood-martyr” of Nazism but because his teachings “exhibit many marks of kinship with basic Jewish orientation,” particularly his writings from prison, in which he “increasingly went back to what to him was the ‘Old Testament’ and thus drank from the same well from which Judaism is nourished.”<sup>3</sup>

Schwarzschild warned Jewish readers that Bonhoeffer's theology is “christocentric,” but he had no hesitation in endorsing Bonhoeffer's “de-religioniz[ing]” of Christianity, which he interpreted as a desire to “tear down the separation between the church and the world.” Schwarzschild expressed approval for what he viewed as Bonhoeffer's call for “complete involvement in the social, political, and even

technological problems of society...[which] must be concrete and specific,” not generalized or spiritualized.

Schwarzschild’s invocation of characteristic phrases like “cheap grace” indicated familiarity with the concerns of Bonhoeffer’s early writings (perhaps indirectly via John Godsey’s introductory text). He expressed appreciation for what he took to be Bonhoeffer’s liberal critique of Karl Barth’s neo-orthodoxy, much of which “sounds very familiar to the Jewish ear.” When a Protestant can talk as Bonhoeffer does of “know[ing] the ineffability of the name of God,” and “lov[ing] life and the world,” Schwarzschild averred, “the Jew knows that here is a man with whom the religious dialogue is likely to be worthwhile.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite praise for Bonhoeffer’s theological outlook, however, Schwarzschild sounded the cautionary note that would become a hallmark of Jewish responses: “A German Christian, a relative and colleague of prominent German aristocrats,” he wrote, “was treated differently...even during the hours of his final and excruciating agony,” than were the martyrs of Israel. This must be said, Schwarzschild reminded his readers, lest “a few heroes like Bonhoeffer may be abused by German and Gentile apologists to outshout the weeping of the Jewish people for its dead.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1965 Bonhoeffer’s legacy vis-à-vis the Jewish people was complicated with the publication of *No Rusty Swords* (an English translation of volume one of Bonhoeffer’s *Gesammelte Schriften*), which featured letters and essays from the period of the church struggle.<sup>6</sup> The same year Schwarzschild wrote a long letter to the editor of *Commonweal* that illumined a different facet of Bonhoeffer’s relevance for Jews--the matter of his “attitude toward Nazism, Jews and Judaism,” which “from a Jewish point of view”

appeared “quite dubious—to put it mildly.”<sup>7</sup> While stressing that Bonhoeffer’s “self-sacrifice and his sensitivity are beyond cavil,” Schwarzschild questioned Harvey Cox’s claim that Bonhoeffer entered the opposition “immediately and straightforwardly.” Appearing to take this as a distorted characterization of the church’s response to Hitler, Schwarzschild reminded readers that the Confessing Church was concerned with Jewish converts rather than Jews *per se*.

Schwarzschild referred to a letter written in 1934 and the 1933 essay “The Church and the Jewish Question” (both of which appeared in *No Rusty Swords*) in order to highlight Bonhoeffer’s rather traditional habit of deference to the state and its leaders. He cited two passages of “The Church and the Jewish Question” that would become foci for subsequent Bonhoeffer scholarship—the statement that the state is justified in adopting new methods in dealing with the “Jewish Question” and the now infamous passage where Bonhoeffer wrote:

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...But the history of the suffering of this people, loved and punished by God, stands under the sign of the final homecoming of the people of Israel to its God. And this homecoming happens in the conversion of Israel to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

“The Church and the Jewish Question” not only affirms the ancient teaching of contempt, according to Schwarzschild. “The height of the argument” is Bonhoeffer’s

clever condemnation of German Christians as representing a “Jewish-Christian type,” an argument Schwarzschild paraphrased this way:

Nazi law means to exclude Christians of Jewish birth from church positions; this makes full membership a matter of biology and law; to make religion a matter of biology and law is a characteristic of Judaism; therefore, the Nazis want to make the Christian church into a Judaizing sect, and Nazism and Judaism are really, at bottom, saying the same thing; this must be prevented.<sup>9</sup>

To a Jew, this is “a most extraordinary conception,” Schwarzschild concluded. Thus while reminding Christians that men like Bonhoeffer were “the rarest of dissenters,” Schwarzschild questioned Bonhoeffer’s credentials as an opponent of Nazi anti-Semitism, as well as his attitude toward Jews.

Schwarzschild’s stated goal in this letter was merely to “make clear the ambiguity of the best of Protestant Christians in a decisive hour, to set the historical record right, to stimulate whatever questions sensitive people may wish to deduce from these circumstances, and to warn against any facile, simplistic interpretation of the phenomenon of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.”<sup>10</sup> In the process, however, he offered one of the most insightful comments about Bonhoeffer and the Jews ever written, noting that “his peculiar view of Israel may be only one ramification of an Occidental background which many share with him and which has not yet been sufficiently analyzed.”<sup>11</sup>

*Eugene B. Borowitz*

Writing in *Judaism* earlier in 1965, Eugene B. Borowitz offered a two-pronged assessment of Bonhoeffer's importance: his thought was related to "emerging trends" in Protestant theology of which Jews should take notice, and he was an unusual species of Christian. "For a post-Hitler Jew," Borowitz wrote, "it is helpful if the human credentials of a German theologian are presented with his ideas."<sup>12</sup> While this might not be normal academic procedure, it is "an old Jewish concern fortified by recent decades which have, to that extent, made existentialists of us all."<sup>13</sup>

Borowitz was apparently unfamiliar with evidence that Bonhoeffer had employed classic anti-Jewish rhetoric in 1933, for he wrote that Bonhoeffer's "credentials are impeccable. He was not only an avid supporter of the Barmen Declaration, but also a major figure in the Confessing Church which stood up to the Nazi regime. More, Bonhoeffer believed his Lutheran faith required him to fight Hitler." Despite the prevailing revisionist mood regarding the "motives and purity of the various German resistance efforts," Borowitz wrote, Bonhoeffer's status--"one of the 'saints'--remains unblemished."<sup>14</sup>

Borowitz introduced his readers to the outlines of Bonhoeffer's prison theology and the various ways it was being interpreted by younger Protestant theologians. Borowitz identified "world come of age," "religionless Christianity," and "participating in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world" as concepts that had become "the focus of the discontent of many of the younger generation of American Protestant theologians."<sup>15</sup> Borowitz himself was impressed by the uncompromising ethical strain in

Bonhoeffer and his disciples, which, he said, “will come as a surprise to most Jews.” In fact, he saw in Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace” evidence of an encouraging trend in Protestant theology:

Bonhoeffer is not unique among contemporary Christian theologians in seeking to recapture the element of law which remains in the life of grace. He, and they, reject a grace which leads to moral anarchy or a law which leads to “rabbinic legalism,” but seek a fusion of the two which makes a new and Christian form of active moral existence possible.<sup>16</sup>

Borowitz was not unaware that for Bonhoeffer ethics must be rooted in Christology; but he generously interpreted this requirement confirming the Jewish notion that the person who would serve God must “go out in the world.” While Bonhoeffer’s “concession to secularity” may have been too sweeping--it is not clear, Borowitz wrote, whether post-Emancipation Jews who continually adjust to “the world” can do so without sacrificing their continuity with Jewish tradition--Jewish thought “has much to ponder over and benefit from in Bonhoeffer.”<sup>17</sup>

*Emil L. Fackenheim*

In 1967 Emil L. Fackenheim offered a more in-depth assessment of Bonhoeffer’s prison theology in a *Daedalus* article concerned with the “self-exposure of faith to the modern-secular World.” Like the Jewish interpreters who had preceded him, Fackenheim read

Bonhoeffer's late musings through the prism of contemporary Protestant theology, noted Bonhoeffer's ethical passion (expressed not only in his "martyr[dom]" but in his emphasis on "the Biblical God[']s" concern with this-worldly life<sup>18</sup>) and viewed his thought through a Jewish lens, perceiving "Hebraic inspiration" in his Christian affirmations from prison and judging that Jews were bound to be moved by them.

Yet Fackenheim regarded as "profoundly problematical" Bonhoeffer's musings on "'man come of age,' happy in his secularity and free of guilt." Fackenheim called it a tragic irony

that Bonhoeffer should have cleared this man of guilt at the precise time when he became implicated, all around him, in a guilt without historical precedent: not only when his "work" was to drive gas-chamber trucks or to fight Hitler's war, but also when it was merely to clean the streets—and hold his peace.<sup>19</sup>

Alleging "a nearly incredible lack of realism" that made him too reluctant to judge the modern world, Fackenheim penned a damning critique of Bonhoeffer's apparent obliviousness to the "Final Solution" that would reverberate through subsequent assessments of Bonhoeffer's relationship to Jews and the Holocaust:

Clear-sighted witness, apostle of Christian self-exposure to the secular world and himself martyr to his cause, Bonhoeffer nevertheless failed wholly to grasp...the monstrous evil of the actual world about him. This

painful truth, in retrospect inescapable, cannot escape his Jewish reader. In a concentration camp filled with Jews subjected to every imaginable form of torture, Bonhoeffer writes that Protestants must learn about suffering from Catholics. No mention is made in the *Letters and Papers from Prison* of Jewish martyrdom.<sup>20</sup>

Fackenheim's article is unfair to Bonhoeffer in at least two ways. First, while it offers a summary of influential passages from *Letters and Papers from Prison*, these are understood as interpreted by those whom Fackenheim dubiously refers to as Bonhoeffer's "theological disciples"—the radical theologians Harvey Cox, Paul van Buren and Thomas J. J. Altizer. Indeed Fackenheim's concern is not with Bonhoeffer's prison theology *per se*, but with its influence among the secularizing theologians of the 1960s. Second, Fackenheim's conclusions with respect to Bonhoeffer and Jewish suffering proceed from the assumption that his last letters ought to have reflected, even dimly, the reality of the "Final Solution." Critical of contemporary assessments of the modern-secular world "as though Auschwitz had not happened," Fackenheim concluded anachronistically that Bonhoeffer himself should have acknowledged that it was happening.<sup>21</sup> In any case, he claimed incorrectly Bonhoeffer wrote in "a concentration camp filled with Jews subjected to every imaginable form of torture," while in fact no writings from Bonhoeffer's time in Buchenwald or Flössenberg have survived.

Fackenheim quickly retracted the charge that Bonhoeffer had been obliviousness to Jewish suffering. In a long note added to the article when it appeared in a book of essays published in 1968, Fackenheim acknowledged objections to the original article

which Eberhard Bethge had offered in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*. Among these was the observation that since the Bonhoeffer family were “risk[ing] their lives in order to put an end to the incredible sufferings of the Jews,” Bonhoeffer’s letters from prison made no “statements about the Jews” so as to avoid the attention of prison censors.<sup>22</sup> Fackenheim conceded that “the fact that Bonhoeffer took personal risks to save Jewish lives bears Bethge out”<sup>23</sup> and confessed that he had underestimated the “tremendous development” in Bonhoeffer’s attitude toward Jews between 1933 and 1944. But he went on to allege, as Schwarzschild had done three years earlier, that “in 1933 Bonhoeffer confined his opposition to Nazi Aryan legislation to its application to converted Jews” and he cited the notorious passage from “The Church and the Jewish Question” describing the putative curse born by the Jewish people for killing Christ.<sup>24</sup>

When Fackenheim spoke of Bonhoeffer at a Holocaust conference in 1976, he struck a significantly more positive note by quoting Theodore A. Gill: “Since the Holocaust what other words can we hear but Bonhoeffer’s who, on the little he could have known, said that thereafter Germans could never speak again evangelically to the Jews.”<sup>25</sup> Fackenheim went on to call Bonhoeffer a “true Christian martyr...one of the saints” and ended by asking who will be heard “if there will still be Jews and Christians 2000 years from now.” Among Christians,” he predicted, “it will be those among our Christian friends who represent today the spirit of that great saint, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.”<sup>26</sup> Given Fackenheim’s well-publicized criticisms of Bonhoeffer a decade earlier, it is not surprising that these comments were reprinted in the *Newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society*.

In 1982 Fackenheim endorsed Bethge’s assessment that Bonhoeffer “belongs to

those making possible a [Christian] theology [after the Holocaust],”<sup>27</sup> a sentiment reiterated in 1994, when he claimed that “Bonhoeffer, had he lived, would probably be the greatest theological friend we have today.”<sup>28</sup> But despite his growing relationship with Bethge, Fackenheim continued to remind Bonhoeffer scholars of the theologian’s paradoxical legacy. In a book review published in *Bonhoeffer Rundbrief* in 1985, Fackenheim acknowledged that in 1933 Bonhoeffer had expressed courageous resistance to the Nazis. “But what does it say for Christian theology,” he asked, “when even in its bravest and deepest representatives it did not or could not recognize the devil’s *kairos* or manage to rise to absolute resistance?” Fackenheim then recalled that Bonhoeffer had not hesitated to invoke the ancient Christian charge of deicide, and that

when this became known in the English-speaking world in the 1960s, Jewish thinkers, the present writer included, pressed Bonhoeffer scholars and followers to investigate whether Bonhoeffer’s brave personal struggle against Nazism, in the years after 1933, was matched by a comparable theological struggle against Christian anti-Judaism, his own included.<sup>29</sup>

Commenting on Bethge’s magisterial work on Bonhoeffer and the Jews, Fackenheim accepted Bethge’s claim that Bonhoeffer prepared the way for post-Holocaust theology “by progressively abandoning remnants of Christian triumphalism; [and] by bringing his Christ ever closer to the Jewish Bible even as he came ever closer to the Jews and their suffering;...” But he pointed out “gaps” in Bonhoeffer’s legacy, including “his ignorance of Jewish thought past (e.g., The Talmud) and present (e.g., Buber, Rosenzweig, and

even his fellow Berliner Leo Baeck).”<sup>30</sup>

*Pinchas E. Lapidé*

As we have seen, following the publication of *No Rusty Swords* in 1965 Jewish interpreters of Bonhoeffer refused to ignore documentary evidence of the theologian’s anti-Judaism. As this evidence was assimilated, Jewish apprehensions of Bonhoeffer took on a dual, even paradoxical, character. But in a study titled “Bonhoeffer und das Judentum” published in 1979,<sup>31</sup> Pinchas E. Lapidé charitably neglected to mention “The Church and the Jewish Question” and presented Bonhoeffer’s theology with considerably more generosity than the Jewish interpreters who had preceded him.

Lapidé conceded that “various statements of Bonhoeffer often appear to us today contradictory, unclear and ambiguous” (referring undoubtedly to the statements that Stephen Schwarzschild had argued “speak for themselves”), but he explained that because Bonhoeffer “was not capable of completely harmonizing the following of Christ with his Lutheran heritage” his image of Judaism is “an unfinished symphony.”<sup>32</sup> As Bethge happily noted in his own assessment of Bonhoeffer and the Jews, Lapidé’s point of departure was not the Bonhoeffer of the church struggle, but “the prisoner in Tegel whose capacity for interpretation and sense of solidarity were fostered by martyrdom.”<sup>33</sup>

Lapidé lauded Bonhoeffer’s deeds and thoughts alike. Regarding the former, he called Bonhoeffer’s decision to join the anti-Hitler conspiracy an act worthy of “torah-true Judaism” and compared him to the Hebrew prophets who “risked their lives for the divine law.”<sup>34</sup> This “exemplary man of God” became “a blood witness for the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob....”<sup>35</sup> As for Bonhoeffer the thinker, Lapidé maintained that following his arrest Bonhoeffer turned away from the abstract theology of New York, London and Berlin. “In prison and in camp,” Lapidé argued, “he wrote a ‘De profundis’ with a Jewish pen containing Jewish thoughts like those we have acquired by the thousands from Bergen-Belsen, from Auschwitz, and from Treblinka.”<sup>36</sup>

Lapidé placed Bonhoeffer not only alongside Jewish victims of Nazism, but in a long line of exemplary Christians who have rediscovered the God of Israel during times of spiritual crisis:

Just as in the famous night of fire in 1645 the Hebrew Bible led the way for Blaise Pascal from the God of the philosophers back to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the dungeon of Tegel Bonhoeffer arrived at the insight that it was necessary to rethink and reinterpret the concepts of penitence, faith, righteousness, rebirth and sanctification in the Old Testament sense.<sup>37</sup>

In the process of rediscovering the Hebrew Scriptures, Lapidé claimed, Bonhoeffer uncovered the taproot of rabbinic Judaism. Lapidé emphasized “the growing Hebraisation of the young theologian’s thought structures,” noting “rabbinic parallels” to Bonhoeffer’s letters and referring to the German theologian as “Rabbi Bonhoeffer.”<sup>38</sup> How Jewish do Bonhoeffer’s words sound to Lapidé? “If Eberhard Bethge had not assured us that Bonhoeffer’s bookcase in prison was of exceedingly humble dimensions,” Lapidé wrote, “I might have fostered the suspicion that he read the Mishnah—not only read, but deeply

absorbed and spiritually digested it.”<sup>39</sup>

Lapide credited Bonhoeffer for providing an impetus for the “revolution” in postwar Christian thinking about Jews and Judaism; but his article was not devoid of criticism. It noted, for instance, that as late as 1937 Bonhoeffer read the Old Testament christocentrically, just as the church fathers had done. For Lapide, however, not even Bonhoeffer’s devotion to Christ represented a barrier to Christian-Jewish rapprochement. For the German theologian viewed Jesus as the “Rabbi of Nazareth,” “a pious Jew” whose Sermon on the Mount represents the “primordially Jewish core” (*urjüdischen Kernstück*) of his teaching. Thus Lapide could understand Bonhoeffer as simultaneously “Jesus-like and deeply Jewish” (*jesuanisch und zutiefst jüdisch*).

Given that Lapide is well-known for acknowledging the essential Jewishness of Jesus, for emphasizing the common heritage of Jews and Christians, and for engaging in dialogue with Christian theologians, his generous interpretation of Bonhoeffer is not surprising. But the contested status of Bonhoeffer’s relationship to the Jewish people has meant that Lapide’s incautious embrace of Bonhoeffer is enthusiastically cited by nearly every Christian scholar who addresses “Bonhoeffer and the Jews.” The sentence from “Bonhoeffer und das Judentum” one repeatedly encounters in these works is Lapide’s assertion that “from a Jewish perspective, Bonhoeffer is a pioneer and forerunner of the slow, step-by-step re-Hebraisation of the churches in our days.”<sup>40</sup> If Lapide took liberties with some of the facts of Bonhoeffer’s life (he was not held in the dungeon of Tegel prison; nor do we possess any writings from his sojourns in Nazi camps), Christians have been unwilling to criticize him for doing so.

*Stanley R. Rosenbaum*

In 1981 Stanley R. Rosenbaum, in an article published in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, made it clear that Christians could not count on Jewish scholars to overlook Bonhoeffer's early anti-Judaism in deference to his resistance activities or his later theological development. Rosenbaum acknowledged Bonhoeffer's record of resistance to the Nazis, the aid he rendered to Jews such as Gerhard Leibholz and the beneficiaries of "Operation 7," and his part in July 20<sup>th</sup> assassination plot. Yet despite Bonhoeffer's status as "the outstanding candidate for Protestant sainthood during the Holocaust," Rosenbaum expressed concern about his initial response to the Aryan paragraph. Walter Harrelson's suggestion that Bonhoeffer's invocation of the curse be "mercifully forgotten," he wrote, "cannot be accepted unless we were reasonably assured that Bonhoeffer's attitude changed significantly in the twelve years then remaining to him."<sup>41</sup>

As evidence that Bonhoeffer's attitude had not changed, Rosenbaum read "The Church and the Jewish Question" in light of passages from other of Bonhoeffer's writings--*Communio Sanctorum* (1927), "The Bethel Confession" (1933), *Nachfolge* (1937) and the circular letter he composed in response to *Kristallnacht*. While conceding that pogrom had been a personal watershed for Bonhoeffer, Rosenbaum judged from scripture references cited in its wake that "the clearly desired effect of *Kristallnacht* in Bonhoeffer's mind is as always to draw some Jews to accept Christianity."<sup>42</sup> Rosenbaum was also critical of Bonhoeffer's limited knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic literature, his lack of close friendships with Jews, and his ignorance of contemporary German Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Leo Baeck. Bonhoeffer

was not concerned with living Judaism, Rosenbaum argued, because he assumed it “died giving birth to Christianity.” It is sad, he concluded, to search Bonhoeffer’s works in vain for references to Jews that are not “ignorantly patronizing or dogmatically conversionist, to say nothing of the total absence of Judaism as a topic fit for discussion.”<sup>43</sup>

Rosenbaum’s assessment of Bonhoeffer’s relevance for Jewish-Christian relations was particularly sobering: “It seems painfully apparent that the only interest a Bonhoeffer Christian can have in Judaism is the individual conversion of its erstwhile adherents,” for this is the position Bonhoeffer maintained throughout his life “with admirable consistency.”<sup>44</sup> “For a Jew,” Rosenbaum wrote, “it is apparent that Bonhoeffer is no saint.” Rather, he is the “best of a bad lot,” a tragic victim of “millennial Christian polemics against Jews.”<sup>45</sup>

Rosenbaum’s article was in part a response to Christian scholars (particularly Bethge, William Peck and Ruth Zerner) who during the 1970s had argued for significant growth in Bonhoeffer’s appreciation of and commitment to Jews. Dissenting from this evolutionary interpretation, Rosenbaum claimed not only that Bonhoeffer was primarily concerned during the church struggle with baptized Jews who were Protestant pastors, but that his response to *Kristallnacht* was essentially conversionist, that he was unconcerned with Judaism and unable to see it as a bearer of divine revelation, and that it is unclear whether Bonhoeffer’s views of Jews and Judaism would have changed after 1945. It is difficult to assess the influence of a single article, but several years later Rosenbaum’s charges were still resonating in the American Jewish community.<sup>46</sup>

*James A. Rudin*

In 1987 Rabbi James A. Rudin of the American Jewish Committee made a presentation at the Evangelische Akademie Nordelbien in Hamburg entitled “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish Perspective.”<sup>47</sup> Rudin’s focus was Bonhoeffer’s impact on American Jewish thinking, particularly among those engaged in interreligious dialogue. This impact did not fully reveal itself, Rudin argued, until America “lost its innocence” in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam and Watergate. Only then were American religious leaders “truly ready to confront the ambiguities and the ambivalences, the cowardice and the courage, the weakness and the strength of the German church struggle.”<sup>48</sup> America’s travails during the 1960s and 70s, Rudin observed, provided an empathetic audience for the story of Bonhoeffer and his colleagues in the struggle for the church.

Rudin argued that although delayed, Bonhoeffer’s impact on American Jews had been profound. Bonhoeffer’s “personal heroism, . . . his stirring sermons and articles, his commitment to concrete action . . . all of these things touch us deeply,” he wrote. “We read with admiration” his “well-crafted and brilliant” attack on the Aryan paragraph in 1933, as well as his famous declaration following *Kristallnacht* that “only the person who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants.” Rudin called “deeply mov[ing]” Bonhoeffer’s decision to join the conspiracy as he “bravely and tragically moved into direct political action against Hitler and the Nazis.”<sup>49</sup> Rudin cited Bonhoeffer’s credentials as a rescuer and friend of Jews which would later become so contested:

As a secret agent of the German anti Nazi group, Bonhoeffer is credited

with sending Jews across the border into Switzerland. And earlier, in 1933, through his friend, Professor Paul Lehmann of Union Theological Seminary, he provided first hand knowledge about the violent anti-Semitism of the Nazis to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, then America's foremost Jewish leader.

Bethge recounts that Bonhoeffer helped many Jewish refugees in the 1930s while serving in England as a Chaplain.<sup>50</sup>

It is Bonhoeffer the “politically active anti Nazi, who paid with his life for his activities” who has resonated within the Jewish community, Rudin observed.

But there is another side to the Bonhoeffer coin, to which Rudin refers by citing the work of Christian scholar Ruth Zerner and quoting from “The Church and the Jewish Question” where Bonhoeffer calls *die Judenfrage* “one of the historical problems which our state must deal with.” Echoing Rosenbaum, Rudin noted that while letters written during his imprisonment reflect an “increased emphasis on the Hebrew Scriptures,” even when Bonhoeffer “turned to the Hebrew Scriptures for strength and comfort, [he] always saw those Scriptures as a prelude to the coming of Jesus, the Christ....He was either unable or unwilling to see the Hebrew scriptures in their own terms, that is without any reference to the Christian gospel.”<sup>51</sup>

If Rudin made an original contribution to the “Jewish perspective” on Bonhoeffer, it was the light he shed on the “the ambiguities and ambivalences” that attend Bonhoeffer’s reflections on the Jewish people:

Traditionally, Christian thinkers have maintained two polarized views of the Jewish people. The first is that the Jews are “the brethren of Jesus Christ,” and those Jews who have been baptized in the true faith have, in theological parlance, “come home” to Christianity.

The opposing polar view is that the Jews represent the “Judas figure,” the “people who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross.” In this theological construction, the Jews are cursed and punished by God, condemned to be the perpetual outsider, the universal pariah people....

Bonhoeffer reflects both of these extreme views.<sup>52</sup>

With this analysis, Rudin illuminated Bonhoeffer’s debt to paradoxical Christian thinking on “Israel,” a matter to which Stephen Schwarzschild had pointed in 1960.

Rudin’s overall conclusion was that Bonhoeffer is a transition figure. He consistently expressed the “traditional Lutheran views of his time and place about Jews and Judaism,” but appeared toward the end of his life to transcend the teachings of his church and embark on a path of Christian universalism. “He was thwarted in his attempt to fashion a new Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism,” Rudin wrote, by the gangster state in which he lived; and the ambiguities that remain have limited his influence within the American Jewish community: while widely respected, he is “not looked to as a major thinker in building bridges” between Christians and Jews.<sup>53</sup>

*Albert H. Friedlander*

In 1988 Albert H. Friedlander addressed the fifth International Bonhoeffer Congress in Amsterdam. Examining Bonhoeffer's sermon "The Church of Moses and the Church of Aaron" (May, 1933), Friedlander engaged Bonhoeffer as a preacher and theologian rather than simply a resistor and author of prison letters. Friedlander commented that "seeing the Hebrew Scriptures re-emerge out of the profoundly Christian sermons of Bonhoeffer, we can at least begin to assert that there can be a new orientation towards the Jewish heritage which is central to Christianity."<sup>54</sup> As if responding to Emil Fackenheim, Friedlander expressed admiration for the awareness of Jewish suffering in Bonhoeffer, who "understood the suffering God, as he had come to understand the suffering of Israel."<sup>55</sup> Friedlander endorsed Bethge's claim that Bonhoeffer's writings contain "signposts" for a theology after Auschwitz, and was even able to construe Bonhoeffer's failings vis-à-vis Jews in a positive light:

That there were flaws in Bonhoeffer's perception of the Jews and Judaism has been noted clearly over the years. These flaws are important and helpful to us, first, because it is much harder to work with saints than with decent, imperfect human beings, and second, because we cannot advocate sainthood toward one another as the hope for resolving ancient problems. It is the growth and development of Bonhoeffer, his acknowledgment of wrong perceptions, which is our greatest instruction.<sup>56</sup>

Despite his flaws, Friedlander concluded, “great souls like Bonhoeffer stood alongside us.”

In an essay published in *European Judaism* in 1980 reflecting earlier conversations with Bethge, Friedlander compared Bonhoeffer with Leo Baeck (a German Jewish theologian imprisoned in Theresienstadt). Friedlander praised Bonhoeffer as one of the few who engaged in “physical, life-saving action which reaches us and saved persons who testify to this today.” But Friedlander reiterated that if we turn to men like Bonhoeffer and Baeck after the Holocaust it is because “of their humanity which faltered and erred but nevertheless endured in a time of darkness.” Both men, Friedlander lamented, had been obscured by mythologies, the Bonhoeffer myth “created because the Church wanted reassurance that it, the Institution, was not a sinner.” These men could only be truly understood once their mistakes “were not covered up by sentimental Piety.”<sup>57</sup>

Like other Jewish scholars influenced by Eberhard Bethge, Friedlander endorsed conclusions about Bonhoeffer that would be contested by other scholars: confidence in Bonhoeffer as a rescuer and protector of the “Jewish friend,” belief that his understanding of Jews and Judaism underwent “growth and development,” and the notion that in his Tegel theology Bonhoeffer somehow grasped the epochal nature of the Holocaust.

*Richard L. Rubenstein*

Richard L. Rubenstein’s reflections on Bonhoeffer are noteworthy not only because of his standing as a scholar of the Holocaust but because his assessment of Bonhoeffer’s

significance for Christian-Jewish relations has steadily evolved. This is evident when we compare the first and second editions of *Approaches to Auschwitz* (1987; 2003), the more recent of which includes a section titled “The Special Case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” that seeks to clarify Stanley Rosenbaum’s memorable description of Bonhoeffer as “the best of a bad lot.”<sup>58</sup>

Like Rosenbaum, Rubenstein took Bonhoeffer to task for his indifference to contemporary Judaism, finding “no evidence that Bonhoeffer manifested any curiosity concerning Jews or Judaism during his 1930-31 stay in America” (this despite the fact that Jewish Theological Seminary was across the street from Union).<sup>59</sup> Yet he reminded his readers that as objectionable as we may find Bonhoeffer’s supersessionism, “without it he would have had no Archimedean point with which to transcend his culture and oppose Hitler and National Socialism. Regrettably, that faith was a seamless garment that included a harshly negative evaluation of Jews and Judaism.”<sup>60</sup>

Also like Rosenbaum, Rubenstein concluded that Bonhoeffer was unable to extricate himself from traditional Christian views of Jews and Judaism, and thus was a victim of the tradition he inherited. Yet despite being unable to see Jews other than through the prism of Lutheran theology, he “rose above the time and culture that produced him to do what only a handful of his fellow Germans were prepared to do, risk and finally sacrifice his life in the struggle to bring to an end the terrible evil that had overtaken his people.”<sup>61</sup>

*Irving Greenberg*

Addressing the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Congress in New York in 1992, Rabbi Irving Greenberg related that “sometime in the early 60s” he had picked up Bonhoeffer’s *Letters and Papers from Prison* and found that it resonated in the soul of that young yeshiva student caught up in the optimism of the 1960s but attempting to assimilate the Holocaust’s effects on the Jewish people. Like earlier Jewish interpreters, Greenberg was drawn to Bonhoeffer by his “irresistible biographical background”; and like them he was intrigued by certain themes in *Letters and Papers from Prison* that resonated with Jewish thought, particularly his rejection of the “one-sided spiritualization of redemption.”<sup>62</sup> According to Greenberg, it was the words Bonhoeffer wrote on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944 predicting the movement toward a completely religionless time that “leaped off the page” at him.<sup>63</sup>

Later Greenberg learned that Bonhoeffer had resisted the exclusion of Jews from the church. “This moved me and confirmed my sole identification with him,” even though he was “arguing for an inclusion of Jews who converted to Christianity,”<sup>64</sup> Greenberg wrote. Greenberg admitted being troubled by the implication in Bonhoeffer’s theology that “there is no way to God except through Christ.” Still, he wanted to believe

that had Bonhoeffer lived he would have continued to be theologically influenced by his encounter with reality and that he too would have given up the imperialist Christian claim, or Christ claim, as another example of letting go in favor of an appreciation of the presence of God in the

presence and the midst of a life of Joy and of others as well. My proof...was the way in which he had this appreciation of what he called the Old Testament and I call Hebrew Scriptures grew in the last period, the breakthrough period, of [his] history.<sup>65</sup>

While not offering a full-scale examination of Bonhoeffer's theology, Greenberg did credit Bonhoeffer with "seeding [his] thinking," convincing him of the legitimacy of Jewish-Christian dialogue, and stimulating his reflections on the relationship of human and divine power.

### *Yad Vashem*

The most significant recent Jewish appraisal of Bonhoeffer's legacy has resulted from the unsuccessful campaign to have him recognized as one of the "Righteous among the Nations" by Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem. While Yad Vashem's assessments of Bonhoeffer are institutional rather than scholarly, they have gained attention because on several occasions since the mid-1980s Yad Vashem has determined that Bonhoeffer did not in fact rescue Jews. Thus Yad Vashem has consistently denied something conceded by even Bonhoeffer's most harsh Jewish critics--that he was intimately involved in rescue activities.

A new campaign to have Bonhoeffer counted among the 22,000 "Righteous Gentiles" currently acknowledged by Yad Vashem was launched in 1998. In an article in *The Christian Century* titled "Why Isn't Bonhoeffer Honored at Yad Vashem?," Stephen

A. Wise noted that among the persons honored as “Righteous among the Nations” are men such as Armen Wegner who did not actually rescue Jews. Bonhoeffer did so, according to Wise, in a number of activities that aided Jewish victims of the Nazi regime. Wise provides the details of “Operation-7,” a scheme devised by Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi and the *Abwehr*’s Admiral Wilhelm Canaris to supply fourteen German Jews with false papers and spirit them across the border to neutral Switzerland during August and September of 1942.<sup>66</sup> Bonhoeffer aided the operation by calling on his ecumenical contacts to arrange visas and sponsors for the rescuees.<sup>67</sup>

Responding to the objection that most of those rescued were converts to Christianity, Wise reminded his readers that “according to Nazi law, a person with a single Jewish grandparent or great-grandparent was considered Jewish, even if he or she had been baptized.”<sup>68</sup> Not only was Bonhoeffer directly involved in rescuing Jews, Wise maintained, he opposed Hitler by speaking out repeatedly against mistreatment of Jews by the Nazis and violated the High Treason Law by sending descriptions of deportation procedures to Wise’s grandfather, who had ties to President Roosevelt.<sup>69</sup> Wise recounted these and other features of Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Nazi Jewish policy in an attempt to demonstrate that he risked “life, freedom, and safety” to protect Jews (a direct appeal to Yad Vashem’s requirements).

Despite this seemingly unassailable argument, Yad Vashem rejected Wise’s twenty-six page petition (which included an affidavit from an “Operation-7” rescuee and a newly found copy of the indictment charging Bonhoeffer with trying to help an imprisoned Jewish professor). In October, 1998 Mordechai Paldiel, director of Yad Vashem’s Department for the Righteous among the Nations, informed Wise that in

Bonhoeffer's case three important pieces of data were lacking: Evidence of personal involvement in assisting Jews at considerable risk to himself, open defiance and condemnation of Nazi anti-Jewish policies, and "direct linkage between the man's arrest and his stance on the Jewish issue."<sup>70</sup>

Yad Vashem's position was further delineated in a *Jerusalem Post* article in which Paldiel explained that although Bonhoeffer was surely a martyr in the struggle against Nazism, he was not among those "non-Jews who specifically addressed themselves to the Jewish issue, and risked their lives in the attempt to aid Jews." In Paldiel's view, Bonhoeffer opposed Hitler on church-state issues and his imprisonment and execution stemmed from "involvement in the anti-Hitler plot of July 1944, and not, to the best of our knowledge and the known record, to any personal aid rendered to Jews." As for "Operation-7," Paldiel opined that since the action had "the full backing of the highest authority in the *Abwehr*," honoring those involved would make a "laughing matter" of the Righteous program. The same article quoted Peter Hoffman, a scholar of the German resistance, who surmised that Bonhoeffer's close ties to government insiders in the resistance were a chief obstacle to his recognition by Yad Vashem.<sup>71</sup> This argument became considerably less plausible in 2003, however, when Yad Vashem honored Hans von Dohnanyi, Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law and fellow *Abwehr* resister, in an official ceremony in Berlin.

In the summer of 2000, Yad Vashem again declined to include Bonhoeffer among its honored "righteous gentiles." Paldiel now revealed what many had long suspected--that part of the problem with Bonhoeffer's candidacy was ideological. "On the Jewish issue," Paldiel wrote, "the record of Bonhoeffer is to publicly condone certain measures

by the Nazi state against the Jews (save only baptized Jews), and to uphold the traditional Christian delegitimization of Judaism, coupled with a religious justification of the persecution of Jews.” Paldiel went on to assert that while Bonhoeffer’s condemnations of Nazi anti-Jewish measures were uttered “in private and among trusted colleagues; his denunciations of Judaism and justification of the initial anti-Jewish measures were voiced in writing.”<sup>72</sup>

Although the International Bonhoeffer Society has remained silent on the issue, Yad Vashem’s repeated refusal to pay tribute to Bonhoeffer has provoked strong reactions among some of his supporters.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile Wise has persisted in trying to effect a reversal of Yad Vashem’s position. In 2002 the Center for Jewish Pluralism of the Reform Movement, represented by Wise and Rabbi Uri Regev, sued Yad Vashem before the Supreme Court of Israel for access to the protocols of Bonhoeffer’s case before the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous among the Nations. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, but Yad Vashem requested a delay, insisting that privacy was crucial to the commission’s work.<sup>74</sup> In October, 2003 the Supreme Court endorsed a compromise which called for Yad Vashem’s protocols to remain confidential while the petitioners were to receive a summary of the commission’s discussions.

At this point Yad Vashem reiterated in a press release that the unanimous decision of the twenty-member Righteous Gentiles Board (comprised of jurists, historians, Holocaust survivors and public figures and headed by former Supreme Court Justice Yaakov Maltz) was based on its conclusion that Bonhoeffer’s

assistance towards the Jews was limited to speaking up for Jewish

converts who belonged to the Christian church that were being persecuted by the Nazis because of their Jewish roots. This was not a case of saving them, but of protecting their rights as Christians. Moreover, Bonhoeffer did not oppose the Nazis per se, but a faction within the church that sought to negate the rights of converts. There is no proof that he was involved in saving Jews.<sup>75</sup>

In light of the work of Eberhard Bethge and other scholars familiar with the relevant evidence, each of these claims is highly dubious. But whether or not Yad Vashem's historical conclusions can withstand scrutiny, it is interesting to note how its explanations have shifted over time. Statements by the organization have leveled charges that he 1) did not save any Jews; 2) did not directly save any converted Jews;<sup>76</sup> 3) spoke out against the Nazis and discrimination toward converts inside the churches, but not against the persecution of Jews; 4) conceded that the state had the right to take any steps against the Jews that were necessary to preserving order; and 5) justified the persecution of Jews from a theological perspective in a statement that was never rescinded. While these claims are not incompatible, they do suggest that the commission's perspective on Bonhoeffer's case has shifted in response to the changing tactics of his advocates, as well as to criticism of its own actions.

News coverage of the controversy accompanying the Israel Supreme Court case yields further insight into the way matters extraneous to the commission's stated criteria have affected the outcome of Bonhoeffer's case. In 2004 an Israeli news outlet quoted Iris Rosenberg, a spokesperson for Yad Vashem, as saying that the court case stemmed

“from a desire to distort the Board's criteria and to adapt them to the desire of individuals in an ideological movement who have their own agenda.”<sup>77</sup> In another news article Avner Shalev, chairman of Yad Vashem’s directorate, said of Bonhoeffer: “... The man [was] an anti-Semite at the beginning of his public career--although he does appear to have changed his ways.”<sup>78</sup>

Yad Vashem has stressed that its decisions should not be viewed as contesting Bonhoeffer’s meritorious recognition by Christian organizations or his “purity of character.” The problem, they say, is that he does not meet the criteria established under the program for recognizing the Righteous among the Nations. But given the charges leveled against him during his consideration for righteous gentile status, this position seems disingenuous. It would appear, rather, that for members of Yad Vashem’s commission Bonhoeffer’s demonstrable involvement in rescue activities, meager though it may have been, is overshadowed by suspicions that he harbored anti-Jewish sentiments. In fact, absent the explanation that Yad Vashem’s decisions represent an emotional response to revelations of Bonhoeffer’s anti-Judaism, it is difficult to understand how any body of knowledgeable persons could conclude that Bonhoeffer “did not oppose the Nazis *per se*.”<sup>79</sup>

As Yad Vashem’s response to Bonhoeffer’s petitioners increasingly cited the theologian’s “denunciations of Judaism and justification of the initial anti-Jewish measures,” the controversy threatened to leave Bonhoeffer without redeeming value for Jews. For the previous forty years, a careful distinction between Bonhoeffer’s theological commitments and his active opposition to the Nazis had allowed Jewish thinkers to maintain a balanced position on Bonhoeffer. While his theology may have remained

mired in anti-Jewish tradition, they reasoned, he compensated for this fault by engaging in resistance on behalf of threatened Jews. But when an authoritative body of Jewish scholars and survivors concluded that Bonhoeffer's resistance activities, heroic though they might have been, were not aimed at the alleviation of Jewish suffering, these actions could no longer compensate for problematic thinking. In this sense, the Yad Vashem controversy has thrown off the tentative balance achieved by the individual Jewish scholars who have engaged Bonhoeffer. Yad Vashem's characterization of Bonhoeffer as "someone whose actions did not include any efforts to try to save Jews or to speak out against Jewish persecution" threatens to tilt the scales of perception toward the conclusion that he was not "good for the Jews."

#### Conclusion: A Cautious Embrace

Over forty years ago Stephen Schwarzschild warned against "any facile, simplistic interpretation of the phenomenon of Dietrich Bonhoeffer."<sup>80</sup> If this warning was addressed to Jewish scholars, it was probably unnecessary, since subsequent Jewish interpreters have treated Bonhoeffer and his legacy as anything but simple. From the beginning, Jewish public engagement with Bonhoeffer has been typified by ambivalence. On one hand, there are consistent expressions of appreciation for his anti-Nazi resistance and little hesitation in referring to him as a "martyr," despite the privileges that accompanied his ethnicity and class. On the other hand, there is lingering concern that Bonhoeffer's heroism may be used to obscure difficult truths about the German churches under Nazism.

This concern seemed justified when Jewish scholars discovered that Bonhoeffer himself expressed troubling ideas on the “Jewish question.” This discovery tainted the Jewish portrait of Bonhoeffer, and the taint has not been removed by claims—common since the 1970s--that over time Bonhoeffer developed a more positive perception of Jews and Judaism. Sobered by “The Church and the Jewish Question” since it appeared in English in 1965, Jewish interpreters seem to have concluded that Bonhoeffer’s thoughts on the “Jewish question” were all too typical of the Christian mind, even if his actions were atypical of the vast majority of Christians in Nazi Germany.

While the evolution of Christian understandings of Bonhoeffer is beyond the scope of this essay, it is interesting to note briefly how Jewish and Christian perspectives on “Bonhoeffer and the Jews” have tended to differ. First, there is divergence on a fundamental point of interpretation related to Bonhoeffer’s initial response to Nazism. For Jewish scholars, including Schwarzschild, Fackenheim, Greenberg and those associated with Yad Vashem--Bonhoeffer’s bold opposition to the German Christians in 1933 must be qualified by his exclusive concern for baptized Jews. For Christian scholars--including Bethge, Clifford Green and James Patrick Kelley--it is precisely Bonhoeffer’s inclusion of Jews *qua* Jews in the church’s realm of obligation that distinguishes his contribution to the church struggle.<sup>81</sup>

One also detects on the part of Christian scholars an inclination to regard the anti-Jewish sentiments in Bonhoeffer’s writings as out of character and extraneous to his main concerns. They are viewed as a “false start” on his path of anti-Nazi resistance, one from which he soon recovered. In any case, they argue, anti-Judaism in “The Church and the Jewish Question” reflects a theological tradition that Bonhoeffer inherited but eventually

repudiated—either through silence, expressions of solidarity with suffering Jews, or opposition to the Nazi regime. These Christian scholars are keen to explore evidence of Bonhoeffer’s changing attitudes after *Kristallnacht*, while Jewish writers remain skeptical of such changes.

But these contrasts *between* Christian and Jewish views of Bonhoeffer should not obscure the many nuances *among* Jewish interpreters, or *within* the writings of a single interpreter. For instance, while the Jewish embrace of Bonhoeffer has always been cautious, the reasons for caution have shifted over time. Jewish interpreters have been careful not to overstate Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Nazi anti-Semitism, his sacrifice on behalf of Jews, or his departure from the anti-Judaism of the Christian tradition. But aspects of Bonhoeffer’s legacy that at one time were a source of unhesitating respect among Jews have come under suspicion with the discovery of primary texts and the appearance of new secondary sources. In fact, early Jewish interpreters of Bonhoeffer held him in high esteem for precisely the characteristics that would later be questioned—his involvement in Jewish rescue and his identity as an instinctive and active opponent of Nazism.

The sources of Jewish scholars’ attraction to Bonhoeffer have shifted over time as well. Men such as Schwarzschild, Borowitz, Fackenheim and Greenberg were drawn to Bonhoeffer in the 1960s as a result of his prison theology’s influence on liberal Protestantism. At the time it was difficult for theologians of any confession to ignore the ferment caused by prominent interpretations of Bonhoeffer’s late writings. Based on their own investigations, these Jewish interpreters became impressed by the resonance of Bonhoeffer’s prison letters with Jewish concerns, particularly their focus on the earthly

life that Christians had often denigrated. These Jewish readers discovered in Bonhoeffer's insights on the world "come of age" and the time of "religionlessness" an opportunity for Jewish self-reflection, as well as a possible corrective to a Christian triumphalism.

While these early shapers of the Jewish perspective on Bonhoeffer were directly concerned with *Letters and Papers from Prison*, they were also familiar with secondary sources (such as John Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* and *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, edited by Martin Marty) that connected the prison theology to earlier themes in Bonhoeffer's thought. But they virtually ignored Bonhoeffer's writings from the church struggle. When these writings became widely known around 1965, the center of gravity in Jewish interpretations of Bonhoeffer shifted dramatically.

Thus five years after his generally appreciative treatment of Bonhoeffer's life and thought in *Judaism*, Stephen Schwarzschild forcefully articulated doubts regarding Bonhoeffer's "attitude toward Nazism, Jews and Judaism." He cited the now infamous passage from "The Church and the Jewish Question" which speaks of a divine curse on Jews that must be borne "through a long history of suffering"—a passage that would haunt Jewish-Christian relations for decades to come. But Schwarzschild did more than point to this obviously problematic dimension of Bonhoeffer's theology. He also illuminated a subtly anti-Jewish dimension of the text—Bonhoeffer's condemnation of German Christians as "Jewish-Christians"—that continues to be overlooked by the majority of scholars.

Emil Fackenheim is another writer whose work evinces a developing awareness of Bonhoeffer's anti-Judaism. Fackenheim began where Schwarzschild and Borowitz had—with an analysis of secularizing readings of Bonhoeffer's prison theology. He

perceived there not only a surprising “Jewishness” in Bonhoeffer’s thought, but a troubling failure “to grasp...the monstrous evil of the actual world about him.” A year later, however, in a subsequent version of the same article, Fackenheim began to shift his focus from 1944 to 1933 with his own citation from “The Church and the Jewish Question.”

Into the 1970s and 80s, ecumenical concerns began to act as a restraint on Jewish responses to Bonhoeffer. This is most evident in the case of Pinchas Lapid, who referred vaguely to “contradictory, unclear and ambiguous” statements in Bonhoeffer’s writings, but concluded rather charitably that Bonhoeffer’s attempt to understand Judaism apart from his Lutheran heritage was “unfinished.” Albert Friedlander evinced a similar generosity, understandably perhaps since he was speaking at an International Bonhoeffer Congress. Observing that the relationship of Bonhoeffer and the Jews had been “fully explored” and his “flaws...noted clearly over the years,” Friedlander expressed “deep satisfaction that this matter has been so clearly expounded and so sensitively presented.”<sup>82</sup>

In this 1988 address Friedlander suggested that for a Jew to rehearse these flaws under the auspices of the Bonhoeffer guild would be a violation of decorum. His message must have come to a relief to the Bonhoeffer community. “Let’s drop this embarrassing and divisive subject,” he seemed to say, “and enjoy the cordial relations that have become possible between our two communities.” But there was more at work here than inter-faith etiquette. For it appears that with Friedlander, as well as with Lapid and to some extent Fackenheim, their critiques of “Bonhoeffer and the Jews” were tempered by their personal relationships with Eberhard Bethge. As it would eventually do among Christian

scholars, the “Bethge effect” may have exercised a considerable influence on Jewish interpreters of Bonhoeffer.

Yet the implicit agreement to bracket the question of Bonhoeffer’s anti-Judaism, seemingly shaped by ecumenical and personal concerns, was not to remain in place. If Fackenheim was willing to locate his embarrassing reference to “The Church and the Jewish Question” in a long footnote in the introduction to a book of essays, Stanley Rosenbaum made it the focus of an article published in the leading journal of ecumenical and interfaith issues. Rosenbaum analyzed anti-Jewish themes in several of Bonhoeffer’s early writings (suggesting that these were more central to Bonhoeffer’s thinking than might be supposed), and explicitly questioned something Fackenheim, Lapide and Friedlander had been persuaded by Bethge to accept—that Bonhoeffer had undergone “tremendous development” in his appreciation of Jews and Judaism.

Rudin, speaking in an ecumenical venue in Germany, was careful to emphasize what Jews appreciated in Bonhoeffer--that he crossed the line from purely spiritual resistance into direct political action against Hitler and resisted Nazi anti-Semitism “through acts of personal friendship and assistance.” However, like Rosenbaum, Rudin read Bonhoeffer’s early response to Nazism alongside themes in his mature theology, noting, for instance, that Bonhoeffer’s spirited defense of Jewish-Christians in 1933 is not surprising given his persistent belief that baptism was the only way Jews could gain salvation. Rudin also returned to a point made in the first published Jewish response to Bonhoeffer by Schwarzschild--that Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom by the Nazis must be viewed differently than that of Jewish victims since his suffering resulted from personal choices rather than Nazi racial fantasies. Like Schwarzschild, Rudin emphasized that this

point should be “carefully stated,” though not overlooked.

So as we review Jewish responses to Bonhoeffer, we encounter an increasing tendency to read Bonhoeffer’s legacy through the prism of his early anti-Jewish rhetoric and to look for signs that anti-Judaism was deeply embedded in his thought. But while Jewish writers have been careful not to underestimate the extent of anti-Judaism in Bonhoeffer’s theology, over time the focus of their condemnation has shifted away from Bonhoeffer himself (Rosenbaum, Fackenheim) and toward his “tradition” (Rudin, Rubenstein)—be it Lutheran, Christian or German. Gradually, in other words, Bonhoeffer’s anti-Judaism has come to be viewed not as a personal failing (one that makes him the best of a bad lot), but as the failure of a tradition that victimized him, a tradition he had begun to rise above. This reading of the problem has allowed Jewish interpreters to occupy a kind of middle ground that illuminates Bonhoeffer’s implication in traditional anti-Judaism while revealing him to be a righteous, if flawed, individual.

It is precisely this benefit of the doubt that Yad Vashem has consistently refused to grant Bonhoeffer. If the Jewish embrace of Bonhoeffer was consistent but cautious from Schwarzschild to Rubenstein, Yad Vashem’s recent statements regarding Bonhoeffer’s candidacy for “righteous gentile” status seem to demand that Jews keep their distance. Of course, Yad Vashem does not speak for all Jews any more than any one of the scholars we have discussed speaks for all Jewish thinkers. But its message has been so clear, so critical, and so public, it has become impossible to consider the Jewish response to Bonhoeffer apart from it. How this response will evolve in the future remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> A mid-1960s turning point for attention to the Jews in Bonhoeffer studies is supported by a survey of the major critical and biographical studies of the period. John D. Godsey's *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) contains only a superficial discussion of "The Church and the Jewish Question" (109ff) and has no index entries for "Jews," "Israel," or "anti-Semitism." However, Mary Bosanquet's *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) includes no less than twenty references to the "Jewish Problem" and Edwin H. Robertson's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Richmond: John Knox, 1967) includes a brief section devoted to "the Jews" (26-28).

<sup>2</sup> See John S. Conway, "Coming to Terms with the Past: Interpreting the German Church Struggles 1933-1990," *German History* 16: 3 (1998): 377-396.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Survey of Current Theological Literature: 'Liberal Religion (Protestant)'," *Judaism* 9 (August, 1960): 366-71; 366-7; 366.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>6</sup> *No Rusty Swords; Letters, Lectures and Notes, 1928-1936, From The Collected Works Of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Volume 1*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson, trans. Edwin H. Robertson and John Bowden (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews," *Commonweal* 83:3 (November 26, 1965): 227, 253-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>9</sup> Schwarzschild became the first (and one of the only) scholars to draw attention to this passage and its anti-Jewish character.

<sup>10</sup> Schwarzschild, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 254.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Eugene B. Borowitz, "Current Theological Literature: Bonhoeffer's World Comes of Age," *Judaism* 14:1 (winter, 1965): 81-87; 82.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>18</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern-Secular World: Philosophical Reflections in the Light of Jewish Experience," in *The Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 278-305; 282-3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> In 2002 Fackenheim acknowledged Bethge's claim that Bonhoeffer "had not even known of the Holocaust, only of Jewish expulsion from Germany." Emil Fackenheim, "Faith in God and Man after Auschwitz: Theological Implications" (April 2002), at <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/fackenheim.htm> (August, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Eberhard Bethge, "Turning Points in Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23: 1 (fall, 1967): 3-21; 6.

<sup>23</sup> This appears to be the first reference by a Jewish writer to Bonhoeffer's purported role as a rescuer of Jews.

<sup>24</sup> Fackenheim, "On the Self-Exposure of Faith to the Modern-Secular World," 318-19 n24.

<sup>25</sup> "Fackenheim on Bonhoeffer," *Newsletter of the International Bonhoeffer Society for Archive and Research, English Language Section* 11 (November, 1977): 2-4; 3. While it is not clear what words of Bonhoeffer to which Gill refers, Fackenheim accepts the veracity of the citation.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup> See *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 293.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua O. Haberman, *The God I Believe In: Conversations about Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 40.

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<sup>29</sup> Emil L. Fackenheim, "(Kritik) Besprechung," review of Ernst Feil and Ilse Tödt, eds., *Konsequenzen: Dietrich Bonhoeffers Kirchenverständnis Heute*; and Wolfgang Huber and Ilse Tödt, eds., *Ethik im Ernstfall: Dietrich Bonhoeffers Stellung zu den Juden und ihre Aktualität, IBK Bonhoeffer Rundbrief 20* (November, 1985): 16-18; 16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Pinchas E. Lapide, "Bonhoeffer und das Judentum," in Ernst Feil, ed., *Verspieltes Erbe: Dietrich Bonhoeffer und der deutsche Nachkriegsprotestantismus* (Munich: Kaiser, 1979), 116-130. It is significant that the title of Lapide's essay is "Bonhoeffer und das Judentum" (not "Bonhoeffer und die Juden"), suggesting that his focus is the "jewishness" of Bonhoeffer's basic outlook rather than what he actually wrote about Jews.

<sup>32</sup> Lapide, 118.

<sup>33</sup> Eberhard Bethge, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews," in John D. Godsey and Geoffrey B. Kelly, eds., *Ethical Responsibility: Bonhoeffer's Legacy to the Churches*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 6 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 43-96; 49.

<sup>34</sup> Lapide, "Bonhoeffer und das Judentum," 128.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119, 123, 124, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>40</sup> For a recent citation of Lapide's statement, see Robert O. Smith, "Reclaiming Bonhoeffer after Auschwitz," *Dialog* 43:3 (fall, 2004): 205-20; 213.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley R. Rosenbaum, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish View," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 18:2 (spring, 1981): 301-307; 301.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 303. Geoffrey Wigoder contends that Bonhoeffer "never ceased to see the Jews as accursed, although he was to suppress such sentiments during the war when he expressed his identification with Jewish suffering." See *Jewish-Christian Relations Since the Second World War*, Sherman Studies of Judaism in Modern Times (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 3.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 306. Emil Fackenheim also complains about Bonhoeffer's ignorance of Jewish thought past and present. See Fackenheim, "(Kritik) Besprechung," 17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>46</sup> In 1986 *The Jewish Spectator* took note of Rosenbaum's article, opining that "Jews familiar with the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian murdered by the Nazis because of his resistance to Hitler and his hordes, will be shocked to learn that Bonhoeffer, who was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler and who helped his baptized brother-in-law and fourteen prominent Jews to escape from Germany, regarded Judaism as obsolete and Jews as in need of salvation by baptism.... Certainly, Bonhoeffer deplored what the Nazis did to the Jews, *but* he also expressed the hope that their sufferings would be instrumental in bringing them to Jesus." See "Bonhoeffer and Judaism," *The Jewish Spectator* (Winter 1985/Spring 1986): 65.

<sup>47</sup> A. James Rudin, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Jewish Perspective," paper presented at the Evangelische Akademie Nordelbien, June 17, 1987, 1, in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> Albert H. Friedlander, "Israel and Europe: Meditations for the Bonhoeffer Conference, 15.6.88." Paper presented at the International Bonhoeffer Congress, Amsterdam, 7, 8, in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>57</sup> Albert H. Friedlander, "Bonhoeffer and Baeck: Theology after Auschwitz," *European Judaism* 14 (summer, 1980): 26-32; 30, 31.

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<sup>58</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and its Legacy* (Atlanta: Westminster, 1987); rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003). That Rubenstein is primarily responsible for the section in the revised edition on Bonhoeffer (262-265) can be demonstrated by comparing it to his paper “Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer a ‘Righteous Gentile’?” presented at the AAR/SBL annual meeting, Nashville, November 20, 2000 and published in the *International Journal for World Peace* 17:2 (2000).

<sup>59</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, “Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer a ‘Righteous Gentile,’” 8, paper presented at the AAR/SBL annual meeting, Nashville, November 20, 2000, and graciously shared with the author.

<sup>60</sup> Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, rev. ed., 264.

<sup>61</sup> Richard L. Rubenstein, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Pope Pius XII,” in Daniel J. Curran, Jr., Richard Libowitz and Marcia Sachs Littell, eds., *The Century of Genocide: Selected Papers from the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches* (Merion Station, PA: Merion Westfield Press International, 2002), 193-218; 202.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>63</sup> Irving Greenberg, “Partnership in the Covenant; Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Future of Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 2. Paper presented at the Sixth International Bonhoeffer Congress, New York, 1992, in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen A. Wise, “Why Isn’t Bonhoeffer Honored at Yad Vashem?” *The Christian Century* 115 (February 25, 1998): 202-204.

<sup>67</sup> Victoria Barnett, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” at <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/bonhoeffer/b1.htm> (August, 2008).

<sup>68</sup> Wise, “Why Isn’t Bonhoeffer Honored at Yad Vashem?” 203.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Letter posted at [www.cyberword.com/bonhoefer](http://www.cyberword.com/bonhoefer) (January 1999).

<sup>71</sup> Marilyn Henry, “Who, Exactly, is a ‘Righteous Gentile’?” *Jerusalem Post* (April 22, 1998), at <http://christianactionforisrael.org/isreport/righteous.html> (August, 2008).

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<sup>72</sup> Cited in Rubenstein, “Was Dietrich Bonhoeffer a ‘Righteous Gentile’?” 2. An earlier version of the paper was published in the *International Journal on World Peace* 17:2 (2000). The significant role played by Bonhoeffer’s theology of the Jews in Paldiel’s view of the case is clear in a document titled “BONHOEFFER Dietrich, Germany–File 890, Analysis of the Case and the Evidential Material,” compiled by Mordechai Paldiel, dated April 30, 2001, and shared with the author by Stephen Wise.

<sup>73</sup> For a strong critique of Paldiel’s arguments as “self-serving, tendentious and biased,” see Geoffrey B. Kelly, “Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Implications for Jewish-Christian Relations,” 133–66, in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg. Chicago: Covenant, 1999. Henry R. Huttenbach calls Paldiel’s October 28, 1998 letter to Wise “a model of Bureau-peak and self-serving logic....” See “Guarding the Gates: On Being a Survivor and Becoming a Righteous Gentile,” *The Genocide Forum: A Platform for Post-Holocaust Commentary* 5:3 (January-February, 1999) at <http://chgs.umn.edu/educational/genocideForum/year5/no3.html> (August, 2008). Daniel McGown suggests improbably that perhaps the reason for Yad Vashem’s refusal to honor Bonhoeffer is the day of his execution, “three years to the day before the massacre” of Deir Yassin. See “RighteousJews.org” at [http://www.williambowles.info/mideast/righteous\\_jews.html](http://www.williambowles.info/mideast/righteous_jews.html) (August, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> See “Yad Vashem’s response to the Jerusalem District Court’s decision on providing the protocols from the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous Among the Nations for the file of Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (26th November 2002), at [http://www1.yadvashem.org/search/index\\_search.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/search/index_search.html) (August, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> While concluding that he “did not save any Jews,” the Yad Vashem press release acknowledged that Bonhoeffer referred a convert to the care of his brother-in-law von Dohnanyi for inclusion in “Operation-7” and in 1937 assisted in the emigration of the Leibholzes. In April 1933, he justified the persecution of Jews from a theological perspective and he was arrested and executed for his opposition to the Nazi regime. Wise is referred to as “a person who did not know” Bonhoeffer, whose support is based on the fact that “following the war he became a symbol of pure Christian resistance to the Nazis and paid with his life.” See press release dated October 2, 2003, at [http://www1.yadvashem.org/about\\_yad/press\\_room/press\\_releases/Court.html](http://www1.yadvashem.org/about_yad/press_room/press_releases/Court.html) (August, 2008).

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<sup>76</sup> According to Yad Vashem, while Bonhoeffer referred Charlotte Friedenthal to his brother-in-law Dohnanyi, it was the latter who was responsible for saving the thirteen “Jews and converts” involved in Operation-7. The help he gave to Gerhard Leibholz occurred “in 1937 when emigration from Germany was still permitted.”

<sup>77</sup> “Yad Vashem Recognizes Righteous Among The Nations,” *Arutz Sheva* (July 15, 2004), <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/65757> (August, 2008).

<sup>78</sup> “Who Chooses the Righteous Gentiles? Court Enters Row about non-Jews Honoured for Holocaust Heroism,” *Buzzle.com* (November 13, 2002), at <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/11-13-2002-30251.asp> (August, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> This statement is contradicted by another statement by Yad Vashem (“The request to recognize Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a Righteous Among the Nations – Background”) which states that “Bonhoeffer was opposed both to the Nazis and a faction within the church because they sought to negate the rights of converts.”

<sup>80</sup> Stephen S. Schwarzschild, "Bonhoeffer and the Jews," 254.

<sup>81</sup> Emphasizing this point of view, Clifford Green writes that “one of the redeeming features of Bonhoeffer’s problematic essay on the church and the Jews in April, 1933 is that he was concerned with the danger to all Jews, not just his co-religionists; this put him a step ahead of the Confessing church which focused on Christians of Jewish ancestry.” Clifford Green, “The Holocaust and the First Commandment” (1992), 5-6. Paper in the Bonhoeffer Archive, Burke Library, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

<sup>82</sup> Friedlander, “Israel and Europe,” 4.