

## “After three years: Discerning signs of the time in the age of Trump”<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Many things changed in America during the first three years of the Trump presidency (2017-2019). What did not change was the proclivity of Americans to view social and political developments through the lens of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s life and writings. In letters to the editor of local newspapers, op-ed pieces, blog posts, teaching videos, book reviews, podcasts and magazine articles, Americans in every part of the country and from across the political spectrum used Bonhoeffer’s actions, words, and purported words to bolster their rhetorical cases. In the process they were deterred neither by a weak grasp of the details of Bonhoeffer’s biography nor by an obligation to consult primary sources. After three years of the Trump presidency, there was every indication that Bonhoeffer would continue to play an outsized role in American political discourse.

### Keywords

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Eric Metaxas; Donald Trump; abortion; refugees*

## 1. Introduction

In *The Battle for Bonhoeffer: Debating Discipleship in the Age of Trump* (2018) I traced Bonhoeffer’s American reception between “9/11” and the 2016 presidential election, with emphasis on how the “populist Bonhoeffer” fashioned by Eric Metaxas had contributed to fervid support for Donald Trump among American Christians. I discovered that during the first two decades of the twenty-first century Bonhoeffer’s perceived relevance for

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1 : This article was first presented as a paper at the XIII International Bonhoeffer Congress hosted in January 2020 by Stellenbosch University and the University of the Western Cape.

American life peaked in moments of perceived crisis. Particularly when American leaders or would-be leaders become compared to Hitler and their policies are likened to National Socialist tyranny, Bonhoeffer becomes a model, and a rallying cry, for resistance.

Not surprisingly, this trend was evident during the first three years of the Trump era. Among those who see Trump as a God-ordained guarantor of Christian values, Bonhoeffer was invoked on a variety of topics – religious freedom, opposition to the “gay agenda,” and support for Israel, for instance. Conversely, for those who see in Trump’s America troubling signs of an eroding democracy, Bonhoeffer was relied on to help interpret the signs of the time and speak out about troubling developments such as the “Unite the Right” march in August 2017, the immigration crisis of 2018, and 2019’s Ukraine scandal.

In this paper I will analyse more carefully the ways Bonhoeffer figured in American public discourse between 2017 and 2019, attending primarily to news articles, opinion pieces, podcasts, letters to the editor of local newspapers, and blog posts. In the process I will identify significant trends in Bonhoeffer’s American reception “after three years” of the Trump phenomenon.

## 2. More attention, less precision

As we will see, the first three years of the Trump era brought a growing consensus regarding Bonhoeffer’s relevance for American life. However, they did little to ensure the details of his biography or theological legacy would be transmitted with any degree of accuracy. In fact, invocations of Bonhoeffer in public discourse between 2017 and 2019 demonstrate that while many Americans undoubtedly revere Bonhoeffer, they are content with a very weak grasp on the details of his life. Distortions and misstatements were particularly evident in letters to local newspapers.

In 2019 a letter in the *Canton (OH) Republic* claimed that Bonhoeffer was “executed for speaking out against the slaughter of the Jews during the Holocaust.” A letter to the *Salisbury (NC) Post* averred that “Hitler had the approval of most of the German church, the exception being Detrick [sic] Bonhoeffer and the Free Church.” A letter in the *Knoxville (TN) News-*

*Sentinel* argued that whereas conservative Christians who support Trump do so by choice, German Christians supported Hitler because they “saw what happened to Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” A letter to the *Dawson Creek* (British Columbia) *Mirror* located the concept of “cheap grace” in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. And an article on the website of *Illinois Family Action* claimed that persecution of the German church began immediately upon Hitler’s rise to power, at which point “a resistance movement sprang up headed by Martin Niemoller [sic] and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.” While none of these errors is as grave as those transmitted by Eric Metaxas in his Bonhoeffer “biography” (for example, claims that Hitler was democratically elected or that the Barmen Declaration condemned antisemitism), they reflect the very same lack of concern for historical accuracy.<sup>2</sup>

In an environment in which rhetorical effect is valued over historical precision, it should not be surprising that the misattributed “Bonhoeffer quote” on silence – “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act” – popped up everywhere between 2017 and 2019. While initially adopted by evangelical Christians who followed Metaxas in encouraging Americans to speak out about the “evil” of abortion, the silence aphorism was routinely cited by progressives as well – on issues such as racism, immigration policy, and the reluctance of elected officials to oppose Trump. By the end of 2019, in fact, the silence quote was as likely to be cited by liberal commentators as by conservatives.

During 2018 and 2019, for instance, Bonhoeffer’s supposed words on silence were invoked to encourage engagement with a whole host of issues,

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2 Norm Beznoska, letter to *Canton* (OH) *Republic* (March 12, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.cantonrep.com/opinion/20190312/letter-to-editor-failing-to-protect-all-children-could-be-americas-death-knell>; Roger Hull, letter to the *Salisbury* (NC) *Post* (July 21, 2019), [Online]. Available: <https://www.salisburypost.com/2019/07/21/letter-trump-follows-a-familiar-playbook/>; W.S. Pryor, letter to *Knoxville News Sentinel* (May 4, 2018), <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/opinion/readers/2018/05/04/davenport-wasnt-old-boys-club-letters-may-4-2018/575449002/>; Jenee Baldwin, “What is Your Faith Worth?” *Dawson Creek* (British Columbia) *Mirror* (September 15, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.dawsoncreekmirror.ca/opinion/columnists/what-is-your-faith-worth-1.23946654>; Laurie Higgins, “Deceitful Lawmakers Seek to Silence Pro-Life Opposition,” (no date). *Illinois Family Action*. [Online]. Available: <https://illinoisfamilyaction.org/2019/04/deceitful-lawmakers-seek-to-silence-pro-life-opposition/>

including the need to protect special prosecutor Robert Mueller (April 2018), the homosexual agenda (May 2018), high-school students donning KKK-hoods (December 2018), late-term abortion and “infanticide” (February 2019; March 2019; April 2019), presidential impeachment (March, 2019), changing sexual mores (March 2019), war (July 2019), moral revival (June, 2019), the detention of immigrant children (August 2019), mass shootings (August 2019), and evangelical leaders seeking to remain “above the fray” (December 2019).<sup>3</sup>

What does the popularity of this Bonhoeffer “quote,” despite conclusive evidence that it is bogus, tell us about the German theologian’s reception

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3 Martin Roundy, letter to *Utah Provo Daily Herald* (April 11, 2018). [Online]. Available: [https://www.heraldextra.com/news/opinion/mailbag/roundy-utah-representatives-must-defend-law-against-firing-mueller/article\\_1cde5805-63d5-544e-ab56-aa539ff90729.html](https://www.heraldextra.com/news/opinion/mailbag/roundy-utah-representatives-must-defend-law-against-firing-mueller/article_1cde5805-63d5-544e-ab56-aa539ff90729.html); [Online]. Available: <http://celebrityinsider.org/jill-duggar-defends-her-husband-derick-dillard-as-he-continues-to-preach-lgbtq-hate-152433/>; anonymous letter to (Philadelphia) *Daily Times* (December 27, 2018). [Online]. Available: [https://www.delcotimes.com/opinion/letter-to-the-editor-hateful-acts-must-be-condemned/article\\_6b37298e-09c0-11e9-9841-d7aed1c7fa27.html](https://www.delcotimes.com/opinion/letter-to-the-editor-hateful-acts-must-be-condemned/article_6b37298e-09c0-11e9-9841-d7aed1c7fa27.html); Mike Fusilier, letter to *Baton Rouge Advocate* (February 10, 2019). [Online]. Available: [https://www.theadvocate.com/baton\\_rouge/opinion/letters/article\\_444a035a-2a81-11e9-acce-9fe2c3dd1d90.html](https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/opinion/letters/article_444a035a-2a81-11e9-acce-9fe2c3dd1d90.html); William J. Jackson, letter to *Greensboro (NC) News and Record* (March 12, 2019), [https://www.greensboro.com/opinion/letters\\_to\\_editor/impeachment-is-now-the-duty-of-the](https://www.greensboro.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/impeachment-is-now-the-duty-of-the). [Online]. Available: [house/article\\_c0c106f6-75f0-58e1-b55d-7f2e2e8c3e2f.html](https://www.greensboro.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/impeachment-is-now-the-duty-of-the); Norm Beznoska, letter *Canton Republic* (March 12, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.cantonrep.com/opinion/20190312/letter-to-editor-failing-to-protect-all-children-could-be-americas-death-knell>; Sylvia Carlisle, letter to *Bristol (TN/VA) Herald Courier* (March 14, 2019).[Online]. Available: [https://www.heraldcourier.com/opinion/your-view-parents-have-abandoned-their-responsibilities-to-their-children/article\\_982f14ed-c493-5eb5-a8c5-b44da2d2214e.html](https://www.heraldcourier.com/opinion/your-view-parents-have-abandoned-their-responsibilities-to-their-children/article_982f14ed-c493-5eb5-a8c5-b44da2d2214e.html); Linda Cameron, letter (March 15, 2019) *Southwest Times Record* (Ft. Smith, AR), <https://www.swtimes.com/opinion/20190315/letter-stand-up-against-abortion>; Will Maule, “Professor Makes Impassioned Plea for Phoenix to Become Sanctuary City for the Unborn,” *Faithwire* (April 5, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.faithwire.com/2019/04/05/professor-makes-impassioned-plea-for-phoenix-to-become-sanctuary-city-for-the-unborn/>; Dave Gauger, “Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler’s Silence Speaks Volumes,” *The Daily World* (WA) (August 19, 2019).[Online]. Available: <https://www.thedailyworld.com/opinion/rep-jaime-herrera-beutlers-silence-speaks-volumes/>; Barbara L. Jean, “How Do We Go On in the Face of Unconscionable Evil?” *Marblehead (MA) Reporter* (August 10, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://marblehead.wickedlocal.com/entertainment/20190810/from-pulpit-how-do-we-go-on-in-wake-of-unconscionable-evil>; Beth Stoneburner, “This Cowardly Evangelical Leader Has Opted for Silence in the Age of Trump,” *Friendly Atheist* (December 28, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2019/12/28/this-cowardly-evangelical-leader-has-opted-for-silence-in-the-age-of-trump/>; Ronnie McBrayer, “Hammer and Nail,” *Walton (FL) Sun* (July 3, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.waltonsun.com/news/20190703/keeping-faith-hammer-and-nail>.

in the era of Trump? The silence aphorism appears to persist as a way of emphasizing citizens' moral duty to speak out in tumultuous times; thus Bonhoeffer's relevance is linked to his habit of speaking and acting against threats to peace and justice. If one is pro-life, the urgent evil about which Bonhoeffer compels one to speak is the push to legalize (or fail to outlaw) so-called late-term abortions. If one is a social justice liberal, on the other hand, it is difficult to imagine an "evil" more demanding of prophetic speech and action than immigrant children separated from their parents and/or detained in "cages."

When Bonhoeffer's legacy is summoned against abortion, the practice is often likened to the extermination of Jews during the Third Reich. Thus, in April 2019 Laurie Higgins of *Illinois Family Action* appealed to Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church as she depicted Democrats as "goosestep[ping] onward toward the 'Final Solution of the Unwanted Baby Question' that they call Health Care." A letter the same month to the *Walla Walla (WA) Union-Bulletin* cited Bonhoeffer in decrying the failure of U.S. senators to arrest "our own holocaust" by supporting the "Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act." Rob Schenck, director of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute in Washington, DC and former pro-life activist, was compared to German advocates of state-sanctioned euthanasia and criminal "Nazi doctors."<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile Bonhoeffer was appealed to in a series of protests against the Trump administration's treatment of refugees. The author of a letter to *Lancaster (PA) Online* cited Bonhoeffer's silence "quote" and said she would speak out about the evil of "pictures of children separated from their parents in cages and a dead father and his daughter on the banks of the Rio Grande." Kristopher Norris began an article in *Baptist Global News* with Bonhoeffer's confession from "After Ten Years" that "we have been

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4 Laurie Higgins, "Deceitful Lawmakers Seek to Silence Pro-Life Opposition," (no date) Illinois Family Action. [Online]. Available: <https://illinoisfamilyaction.org/2019/04/deceitful-lawmakers-seek-to-silence-pro-life-opposition/>; Victor Phillips, letter to Walla Walla (WA) Union-Bulletin (April 14, 2019). [Online]. Available: [https://www.union-bulletin.com/opinion/letters\\_to\\_editor/speak-up-against-scourge-of-abortion/article\\_b54db8da-5713-11e9-bef3-1f47fbb98e04.html](https://www.union-bulletin.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/speak-up-against-scourge-of-abortion/article_b54db8da-5713-11e9-bef3-1f47fbb98e04.html); Michael Egnor, "Betraying Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Espousing Abortion," Mind Matters News (June 5, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://mindmatters.ai/2019/06/betraying-dietrich-bonhoeffer-by-espousing-abortion/>.

silent witnesses of evil deeds.” “Confronted with family separations at the border, automatic detentions, dangerous dehumanizing rhetoric from our highest office and authoritarian misappropriations of scripture from our highest attorney,” Norris wrote, “many churches and Christian leaders have remained silent witnesses.”<sup>5</sup>

The author of a letter to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* quoted Bonhoeffer’s statement that “the test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children,” and concluded that by this logic “we are the most immoral of societies possible.” Meanwhile a columnist for an Oklahoma paper complained of “the abject cruelty our government is inflicting on refugees at our southern border.” Confessing that she was thinking “a lot about Dietrich Bonhoeffer this week,” the author emphasized the need for action by citing Bonhoeffer’s image of “driv[ing] a spoke into the wheel itself.” Four different Bonhoeffer “quotes,” same point: for serious Christians who wish to avoid the mistakes of the Nazi era, silence on immigration is not an option.<sup>6</sup>

I think these examples show that the debunked silence quote persists because it succinctly communicates a message that conservatives and

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5 Patti Lehman, letter “Raising Voices against Evil,” *Lancaster (PA) Online* (July 27, 2019). [Online]. Available: [https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/letters\\_to\\_editor/raising-voices-against-evil-letter/article\\_aa373f12-af3c-11e9-8c78-63925c1b93c7.html](https://lancasteronline.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/raising-voices-against-evil-letter/article_aa373f12-af3c-11e9-8c78-63925c1b93c7.html); Kristopher Norris, “We Can No Longer be “Silent Witnesses to Evil Deeds,” *Baptist News Global* (June 29, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://baptistnews.com/article/we-can-no-longer-be-silent-witnesses-of-evil-deeds/#.W0DjZO4vzIU>.

6 Robert Veitch, letter to *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* (June 24, 2019). [Online]. Available: <http://www.startribune.com/readers-write-immigrant-children-in-detention-pollinator-friendly-parks-trump-s-iran-reversal/511751972/>; Holly Rosser Miller, “Caged Refugees’ Treatment ‘Disgusting,’” *Muskogee (OK) Phoenix* (July 7, 2019). [Online]. Available: [https://www.muskogeephoenix.com/opinion/columns/rosser-miller-caged-refugees-treatment-disgusting/article\\_3db25464-7611-5296-b2a8-00783dd08d13.html](https://www.muskogeephoenix.com/opinion/columns/rosser-miller-caged-refugees-treatment-disgusting/article_3db25464-7611-5296-b2a8-00783dd08d13.html).

A June 2019 sermon by Mark Edington of St. John’s Church in Newtonville, Massachusetts highlighted the separation of immigrant children from their parents. “Our Bonhoeffer moment,” Edington preached, is a moment of decision. “The polls tell us that a large majority of evangelical Christians in the United States ... support this government and brought it into being. We have to decide whether we want to go along with that idea of what our faith is about, or to stick with what we know Christ lived for, and what Christ died for.” See Mark Edington, “Our Bonhoeffer Moment,” Saint John’s Parish website (June 17, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://saintjohnschurch.com/sermons/our-bonhoeffer-moment/>.

liberals alike believe is personified by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: when things are out of hand, good people must resist in whatever ways are open to them.

### 3. Expanding the Bonhoeffer canon

These references to *Ethics, Letters and Papers from Prison* and “The Church and the Jewish Question” suggest another trend that emerged between 2017 and 2019: a notable expansion in of the popular canon of Bonhoeffer’s writings among authors of on-line opinion pieces. Despite a clear tendency in American public discourse to value rhetorical point-scoring over historical accuracy, this expansion of the canon is a trend in Bonhoeffer’s American reception that should hearten advocates of his legacy.

*Ethics* in particular was cited widely on-line between 2017 and 2019. Bonhoeffer’s assertion that “destruction of the embryo in the mother’s womb ... is nothing but murder” (“Reproduction and Developing Life”; *DBWE* 6: 203) has long been a staple of pro-life apologetics. But recently other sections of *Ethics* have begun turning up in letters and opinion pieces addressing abortion and other issues. For instance, a letter to the Steubenville (OH) *Herald Star* in August 2019 criticized possible appeal of the Hyde Amendment (which bars the use of federal funds to pay for abortion in most cases) by citing Bonhoeffer’s statement in “The ‘Ethical’ and the ‘Christian’ as a Topic” that ethical practice requires “extremely enthusiastic support of the equal dignity” of all humanity (*DBWE* 6: 377). And in September 2019 an opinion piece in *Christian Today* nuanced Bonhoeffer’s oft-cited words on “destruction of the embryo” by noting his observation from the same passage that since abortion can be “an act of despair...the guilt may often lie rather with the community than with the individual” (*DBWE* 6: 203).<sup>7</sup>

In 2019 *Ethics* was also mined for insights on an array of issues, including truth-telling and affordable housing. In September, for instance, an

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7 Ed Bednar, letter to *Steubenville* (OH) *Herald Star* (August 4, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.heraldstaronline.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/2019/08/hyde-repeal-would-be-troubling/>; J. John, “When We Know God We Can’t Possibly Stand on the Side of Abortion,” *Christian Today* (September 14, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://christiantoday.com/article/when-we-know-god-we-cant-possibly-stand-on-the-side-of-abortion/133212.htm>.

opinion piece for *The Daily Telegraph* (Adrian, MI) argued for the inclusion of quality in affordable housing discussions, citing Bonhoeffer's statement from "The Right to Bodily Life" that "the homes of people, are not, like the shelters of animals, merely the means of protection against bad weather or the night, or merely places for rearing the young; they are places in which a person may relish the joys of their personal life in the intimacy and security of their family and their property" (*DBWE* 6: 181). And in an oblique reference to Bonhoeffer's discussion of a "conscience bound by principles" in "The Structure of Responsible Life" (*DBWE* 6: 280), a letter writer in Florida defended Trump's repeated misstatements, claiming that lies' consequences are more important their quantity.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, Bonhoeffer's concept of "cheap grace" remains a Christian rallying cry in the age of Trump and continues to be invoked on all sides. In an October 2019 homage to Confessing Church member and anti-Nazi resistor Elisabeth Schmitz in *Baptist Global News*, Alan Bean quoted Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*: "It is not enough to lament the general sinfulness of human beings ... Rather specific sins have to be named, punished, and sentenced" (*DBWE* 4: 286). And in a March opinion piece in the *Washington Post* Elisabeth Bruenig commented on evangelicals' willingness to ignore Trump's extra-marital tryst with Stormy Daniels, noting that Bonhoeffer "might have identified this convenient display of clemency as 'cheap grace.'"<sup>9</sup>

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- 8 David Kook, "Let's Include Quality in Affordable Housing Discussions," *The Daily Telegraph* (Adrian, MI) (September 21, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.lenconnect.com/opinion/20190921/david-kool-lets-include-quality-in-affordable-housing-discussions>; Jack E. Brush, "Is Trump Corrupting Washington, D.C.?" *The Villages (FL) News* (February 27, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.villages-news.com/2019/02/27/is-trump-corrupting-washington-d-c/>. Since Trump's lies exist along "a spectrum of minor infractions, many of which have no apparent consequences in daily life," the author concluded, they are less consequential (for good or ill) than those of Bonhoeffer under interrogation.
- 9 Alan Bean, "Silence in the Face of Evil: Learning from an Obscure Schoolteacher Who Urged Karl Barth and Other Theologians to Stand in Solidarity with the Jews in Nazi Germany," *Baptist News Global* (October 18, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://baptistnews.com/article/silence-in-the-face-of-evil-learning-from-an-obscure-schoolteacher-who-urged-karl-barth-and-other-theologians-to-stand-in-solidarity-with-the-jews-in-nazi-germany/#.W83VKntKjIU>; Elizabeth Bruenig, "Evangelicals' Support for Trump Will Cost Them--Spiritually," *Washington Post* (March 27, 2019). [Online]. Available: ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christians-offer-trump-cheap-grace/2018/03/27/9e7f5034-31c9-11e8-8bdd-cdb33a5eef83\\_story](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christians-offer-trump-cheap-grace/2018/03/27/9e7f5034-31c9-11e8-8bdd-cdb33a5eef83_story)).

*Discipleship* was also cited by a letter writer in Utah who chastised Mormons for yielding to Church pressure in opposing the legalization of medical marijuana: “German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed: “The life of discipleship can only be maintained so long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves ... The disciple always looks only to his master, never to Christ and the law, Christ and religion, Christ and the world” (*DBWE* 4: 304). Anyone who preaches strict obedience to Mormon prophets, the writer concluded, advocates “priestcraft.” Another letter to the editor in June 2018 responded to Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ reference to Romans 13 in support of American immigration law by challenging Christians “to choose costly discipleship over cheap ‘grace.’”<sup>10</sup>

Another popular way of invoking Bonhoeffer in 2019 involved “The Church and the Jewish Question” and the possibility of “direct political action on the part of the church.” Although the *DBWE* translates the operative passage as “seiz[ing] the wheel itself” (12: 353), an earlier rendering as “driv[ing] a spoke into the wheel” of state seems to have become lodged in the American imagination. In July 2019 Holly Rosser Miller ended an editorial on caged immigrants with a reference to Bonhoeffer’s 1933 essay: “*We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice,*” she counselled; “*we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.*” In an October opinion piece in *Baptist Global News* Alan Bean wrote that

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html?utm\_term=.c63d4e3e5cdf); The term “cheap grace” appeared in a story in *The Catholic Herald* in September as German bishops met “to put settled matters of doctrine on the table for discussion and a “binding” vote. According to the story, apostolic nuncio Archbishop Nikola Eterović invoked Bonhoeffer who, he said, “described attempts to negotiate solutions to the problems that inevitably arise from time to time when Christians live in the world without becoming conformed to it as “cheap grace.” In order to remain in Christ’s words, Eterović said, “to which [Bonhoeffer] has attested by his heroic testimony,” we must search for “costly grace.” See Christopher Altieri, “Germany’s Nuncio Reminds Bishops of Pope Francis’s Warning,” *The Catholic Herald* (September 24, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2019/09/24/germanys-nuncio-reminds-bishops-of-pope-franciss-warning/>.

10 Steve Warren (letter), *Salt Lake Tribune* (December 14, 2018). [Online]. Available: <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/letters/2018/12/14/letter-blind-obedience-is/>; James Yamakawa, “Choose Discipleship over Cheap Grace” letter to *delmarvanow.com* (June 26, 2018). [Online]. Available: <https://www.delmarvanow.com/story/opinion/readers/2018/06/26/choose-discipleship-over-cheap-grace/719024002>.

Christians “might ... be required to sacrifice themselves as a stick jammed into the spokes of the state’s wheel of oppression.”<sup>11</sup>

A May 2019 letter to the *Quay County* (NM) *Sun* cited a significantly embellished version of Bonhoeffer’s 1933 justification for church resistance, in which an outlaw state is depicted as a chariot led by fire-breathing horses and driven by a vicious tyrant who is “smashing whole villages under the wheels.” Following Bonhoeffer, the author argues that to stop “the psychopathic chariot” it may be necessary “to spike the chariot wheels.” In June an op-ed in the *Freeport* (IL) *Journal Standard* Violet Johniker celebrated the work of liberal activist William Barber, whom she connected with Bonhoeffer’s charge not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheel of injustice, but to drive a spoke into the wheel itself. “What wheels are we watching roll by,” Johniker asked, “and what will it take for us to finally stop them?”<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, during the Trump era Bonhoeffer’s time in New York has become a reference point for those wishing to highlight his relevance for American culture. For instance, in a September 2019 opinion piece in *The Christian Post* titled “Killing the Unborn, Confessing to Plants,” Michael Brown lambasted Union Theological Seminary for a chapel service in which community members made confession to an assemblage of potted plants. This sort of thing, Clark opined, is why in 1939 [actually 1933] Bonhoeffer wrote that UTS students “are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about...[and] become intoxicated with liberal

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11 Rosser Miller, “Caged Refugees’ Treatment ‘Disgusting’”; Bean, “Silence in the Face of Evil.”

12 Gordon Runyan, letter to *Quay County* (NM) *Sun* (May 22, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.qcsunonline.com/story/2019/05/22/opinion/pastor-evil-must-be-resisted/20056.html>; Violet Johniker, “Moral Revival Requires a Cultural Shift,” *Freeport* (IL) *Journal Standard* (June 2, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.journalstandard.com/opinion/20190602/my-view-moral-revival-requires-cultural-shift>.

Another memorable image from Bonhoeffer invoked during 2019 came from a letter writer to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, who implored Republican senators to stand up to Trump by repeating Bonhoeffer’s adage that “if you board the wrong train, it is no use running along the corridor in the other direction.” See Eric Huber, “Republican Senators Should Stand up to the Appeasement of Trump,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (December 28, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2019/12/28/eric-hubner-republican/>

and humanistic phrases ...” (*DBWE* 10: 267). Clark accused the seminary of having forgotten what Christian theology stands for and ended by asking what Bonhoeffer would think.<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s New York sojourns played a very different role in a September 2019 blog post by Craig Morton titled “Time to Move to Canada Yet?” Reflecting on overheard conversations about how “illegals” were depleting Social Security benefits, how Democrats wanted to confiscate all privately held guns, and how “the blacks” just needed to fit in, Morton considered whether the time had come for he and his family to emigrate. His answer came when he remembered that although “in the spring [actually, summer] of 1939 Dietrich Bonhoeffer was safe and sound in the United States ... he made the ‘fateful decision’ to return to Nazi Germany.” Since “our present turmoil is nothing like the regime of the Third Reich,” Morton concluded, Bonhoeffer’s example suggests that we too can persevere.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Embracing “stupidity”

With regard to the expansion of the Bonhoeffer canon in American public discourse, we should not overlook the steady increase – beginning in mid-2017 – in references to Bonhoeffer’s essay “After Ten Years.” Particularly among members of the anti-Trump resistance, this essay has come to be regarded as a prescient description of American life at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Many of these opponents of the Trump administration resonate with Bonhoeffer’s description of an era in which “the huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into confusion,” a time in which “evil ... appear[s] in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, [and] social justice,” and in which “stupidity” becomes more dangerous than malice (*DBWE* 10: 38; 43).

Perhaps the first pundit to cite “On Stupidity” in commenting on the Trump era was cable news host Joe Scarborough, who posted an excerpt from this

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13 Michael Brown, “Killing the Unborn, Confessing to Plants,” *The Christian Post* (September 21, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.christianpost.com/voice/killing-the-unborn-confessing-to-plants.html>

14 Craig Morton, “Time to Move to Canada Yet?” *RDC* (blog) (September 23, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rdc/2019/09/canada-immigration-should-i-stay-bonhoeffer-time-to-move-to-canada/>

section of “After Ten Years” on his Facebook and Twitter feeds in July 2017. By the following year, references to “On Stupidity” were widely being applied to Trump and Trumpians. For instance, in August 2018 the author of a letter to the *Cumberland (MD) Times-News* noted that although he had initially resisted drawing parallels between Trump’s America and Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer’s words on “folly” (the rendering of *Dummheit* in earlier versions of the essay) had led him to reconsider. To make the point, the writer quoted Bonhoeffer’s observation that “against folly we have no defence ... [since] facts that contradict personal prejudices can simply be disbelieved.” The author concluded that under current circumstances, the cure for folly was to fear God more than illegal immigrants.<sup>15</sup>

The same month, writing at *freelancechristianity*, Vance Morgan described his discovery of “After Ten Years” while preparing to teach a class on “Grace, Truth, and Freedom in the Nazi Era.” Noting that millions of Americans seemed to accept Trump’s notion of a “national emergency” at the country’s southern border, Morgan claimed that Bonhoeffer’s essay rivaled Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in its capacity to address immediate challenges while speaking to timeless issues. “Although his context was Nazi Germany,” Morgan wrote, Bonhoeffer’s “observations about what happens to human decency and courage when a political culture begins to disintegrate and a social atmosphere becomes toxic read as if they were written this morning.” On the theologian’s notion of “stupidity,” Morgan noted that it’s something contemporary Americans encounter every day, “from the White House to the local coffee shop.”<sup>16</sup>

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15 Gene Gall, “Folly Can Be the Most Formidable of Our Foes,” *Cumberland (MD) Times-News* (August 14, 2018). [Online]. Available: [http://www.times-news.com/opinion/letter-to-ctn-folly-can-be-the-most-formidable-of/article\\_34b97c04-9f35-11e8-ac8b-bb26412d9884.html](http://www.times-news.com/opinion/letter-to-ctn-folly-can-be-the-most-formidable-of/article_34b97c04-9f35-11e8-ac8b-bb26412d9884.html).

16 Vance Morgan, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Donald Trump and Stupidity,” *freelancechristianity* (January 12, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/dietrich-bonhoeffer-donald-trump-and-stupidity/>. Significantly, Morgan sees stupidity not as a Trumpian, but an American foible. “In our current political climate,” he writes, “stupidity ranges across the spectrum from the most obsessed Trumpster to the most avid Berniebot. Whether in support of or in opposition to any particular agenda or political figure, stupidity always dehumanizes, replacing thought and deliberation with soundbites and memes. Bonhoeffer’s diagnosis seventy-five years ago could have been written this morning.”

In a February 2019 opinion piece in *The Federal Observer* titled “Bonhoeffer on the ‘Stupidity’ That Led to Hitler’s Rise,” Annie Holmquist cited much of this section of “After Ten Years” in stressing that “every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity.” As both major US political parties continue to centralize power, Holmquist wrote, “Americans today might do well to heed Bonhoeffer’s warning.” In December Fred Clark commented on “The Folly of Trumpism” at *slacktivist*, where he related that reading “After Ten Years” confirmed his conclusion that “when you’re up against folly, you can’t win.” Clark wrote that what Bonhoeffer, Hannah Arendt and other eyewitnesses to lethal folly describe is the “weaponized bad faith – which has become the defining characteristic of conservative white politics and conservative white religion in America.<sup>17</sup> Confident in “On Stupidity’s” self-evident timeliness, some authors have quoted much or all of it with a minimum of commentary. The December 31, 2019, edition of the *Southside* (VA) *Messenger*, for instance, printed “On Stupidity” without analysis, as its end-of-year editorial.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. From Bonhoeffer moment to Bonhoeffer as model

Despite this evidence of Bonhoeffer’s expanding relevance for America life, announcements of a “Bonhoeffer Moment” that were sounded so confidently beginning in 2015 have been heard with less frequency and force over the past eighteen months and seem to have played out during 2018. An essay that spring titled “‘Is This a Bonhoeffer Moment?’: Asking the Right Questions in Trump’s America” won a speech contest at Eastern Mennonite University. In June the California Family Council proclaimed a “Bonhoeffer moment” over a state bill that would declare “sexual orientation change efforts” illegal under the state’s consumer fraud law. An August review of *The Shadow President: The Truth about Mike Pence*

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17 Annie Holmquist, “Bonhoeffer on the ‘Stupidity’ That Led to Hitler’s Rise,” *The Federal Observer* (February 14, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://federalobserver.com/2019/02/bonhoeffer-on-the-stupidity-that-led-to-hitlers-rise/> (the article was originally published September 18 on the website of the Foundation for Economic Education); Fred Clark, “The Folly of Trumpism,” *slacktivist* (December 5, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2019/12/05/the-folly-of-trumpism/>.

18 [Online]. Available: <http://southsidemessenger.com/bonhoeffer-on-stupidity-entire-quote/>

claimed that relentless criticism of the Trump administration was evidence that “the American church is having her Detrick [sic] Bonhoeffer moment.” But the phrase “Bonhoeffer moment” does not seem to have appeared in print in 2019.<sup>19</sup>

But if the concept of a “Bonhoeffer moment” has lost momentum, the sense that Americans are in the midst of a political and cultural *kairos* for which Bonhoeffer holds special relevance has not. In fact, Bonhoeffer’s perceived salience for American life – and American Christian existence in particular – seems not to have waned at all; nor has the competition to claim him on both sides of divisive issues. A sense of how deeply Bonhoeffer has been assimilated into American thinking can be gleaned from reviewing a few recent publications whose Christian authors are convinced that Bonhoeffer remains a unique guide for Christian discipleship in “these times.”

In March 2019 *cbnnews* (the web outlet of the Christian Broadcasting Network) asked Jim Garlow, whose organization “Well Versed” is dedicated to spreading “biblical principles of governance,” to advise American Christians on bringing “biblical change” to their culture. In his response, Garlow did not mention an American politician, philanthropist, or social activist, past or present. Rather, he held up Bonhoeffer as his model, based on what he called the German theologian’s boldness in standing for truth. “Who can name all the other pastors in Berlin [during the Nazi era] who wimped out?” Garlow asked. His point was that as part of a faithful

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19 [Online]. Available: <https://emu.edu/now/news/2018/09/is-this-a-bonhoeffer-moment-takes-second-in-bi-national-c-henry-smith-oratorical-contest/>; Dean Broyles, “To Pastors–This is a Bonhoeffer Moment: The State is about to Declare Gospel a Fraud,” *California Family Council* (June 6, 2018). [Online]. Available: <http://www.californiafamily.org/2018/to-pastors-this-is-a-bonhoeffer-moment-the-state-is-about-to-declare-gospel-a-fraud/>; Mario Murillo, “It’s Really Quite Disgusting,” *mariomurilloministries* (August 25, 2018). [Online]. Available: <https://mariomurilloministries.wordpress.com/2018/08/25/its-really-quite-disgusting/>. One exception is the December 3, 2019, episode of a podcast called “The Bonhoeffer Show,” which began with the question “Have we reached a Bonhoeffer moment? A moment to declare truth, regardless of what it might cost us?” ([Online]. Available: <http://thebonhoeffershow.libsyn.com/>; Although Bob Seidensticker’s “Gay Marriage: A Dietrich Bonhoeffer Moment?” was published at *crossexamined* on April 9, 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/crossexamined/2019/04/gay-marriage-a-dietrich-bonhoeffer-moment/>, it was responding to a 2015 post by Larry Tomczak titled “Church is Facing a Dietrich Bonhoeffer Moment.”

“remnant” in Nazi Germany, Bonhoeffer is a model for Christians in any time and place who seek to remain faithful to God in a hostile culture.<sup>20</sup>

The same month (March 2019) New Testament scholar Ben Witherington invoked Bonhoeffer in addressing United Methodists’ decision to reaffirm a traditional understanding of marriage. Some progressives had condemned the decision, Witherington noted, lamenting that the church would soon find itself on the “wrong side of history.” But Witherington countered that Christians should be more concerned with being “on the right side of God and his Word.” After all, he wrote, “judged from within that cultural bubble [of Nazi Germany] people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth were on the wrong side of history, and they paid for it, including Bonhoeffer being martyred.” Witherington does not venture to argue that Bonhoeffer would have opposed gay marriage; only that he personifies a form of Christian existence that is relevant because it values Scriptural faithfulness over cultural acceptance.<sup>21</sup>

During the summer of 2019 Dinah Dye, a bestselling “messianic” Christian author, released a series of DVD programs titled “Bonhoeffer: From Tyranny to Freedom.” The nine-part series presented the case that “political correctness and identity politics are the new totalitarianism,” that Western civilization is “under threat of extinction,” and that Christians “must push back” just as Bonhoeffer did. Claiming to reveal “striking similarities between the Nazis and today’s Democrat Party,” “Bonhoeffer: From Tyranny to Freedom” holds up the German theologian as one who “speaks to our generation and time.” The series reveals much more about Dye’s apocalyptic view of American culture than about Bonhoeffer himself; yet the German theologian provides her with a widely admired model of Christian resistance to totalitarianism.<sup>22</sup>

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20 Jason Yates, “Dr. Jim Garlow: The ‘Jolting’ Reality of America’s Biblical Void and a ‘Bold’ Plan to Turn the Tide” *cbnnews* (March 8, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2019/march/dr-jim-garlow-the-jolting-reality-of-americas-biblical-void-and-a-bold-plan-to-turn-the-tide>

21 Ben Witherington, “Should Christians Worry about Being on the Wrong Side of History?” *The Bible and Culture* (March 28, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2019/03/28/should-christians-be-concerned-about-being-on-the-wrong-side-of-history/>

22 Dinah Dye, “Bonhoeffer: From Tyranny to Freedom,” back cover of DVD set. See also Dye’s podcast, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer Fought What Is Recurring Today,” *Returning to*

2019 also saw the launch of a podcast called “The Bonhoeffer Show,” “an irreverent show about culture, politics, religion, and making disciples.” Despite the name, however, “The Bonhoeffer Show” isn’t so much about Bonhoeffer as it is about discipleship, disciple-making, and how to bear Christian witness in an increasingly secular culture. The show’s name reflects the fact that for many American evangelicals the theologian has become synonymous with discipleship and counter-cultural action. A similar view of Bonhoeffer as a guide for Christian faithfulness animates a 32-page booklet published by Christians United for Israel titled *Faith to Action*. The booklet features Bonhoeffer’s picture on the cover and excerpts from his writings appear on nearly every page; yet Bonhoeffer’s role in this extended plea for Christians to support the State of Israel is indirect. He is not portrayed as a philosemite or defender of Jews (as other authors have done), but as “a hero [who] worked to defend truth.” As such, Bonhoeffer helps us understand “our Christian role toward Israel and the Jewish people and toward truth itself.” The booklet concludes by noting that although the number of those calling for the complete destruction of Israel is at a record high, God always has his Bonhoeffers, “those whom he is calling to stand up against the darkness of this age and be a voice for truth.”<sup>23</sup>

This view of Bonhoeffer as a unique model of Christian existence is advanced not only on the right, however. In July 2019 Pat Martin wrote a brief sermon for the *National Catholic Reporter* titled “God Hears the Cry of the Poor.” Although he could well have cited many Catholic examples of God’s preferential option for the poor, Martin chose the Protestant Bonhoeffer. He did so because his point was not the needs of the poor per se, but the sort of radical Christianity that makes them a priority. “[Bonhoeffer] lived against the tide of national hysteria and the lies of racial supremacy,” Martin writes, and “by his death he left a legacy of conscience and courage that has defined radical faith.” Martin challenged readers to

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*Eden* (podcast) (June 23, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://rte.podbean.com/e/dietrich-bonhoeffer-fought-what-is-repeating-today/>

23 The podcast is connected with The Bonhoeffer Project, “a year-long leadership development community” which aims to turn leaders into disciple makers. [Online]. Available: <https://thebonhoefferproject.com/>; Christians United for Israel, *Faith to Action* (no date). [Online]. Available: [https://www.cufi.org/wp-content/uploads/Bonhoeffer\\_Booklet\\_NATIONAL.pdf](https://www.cufi.org/wp-content/uploads/Bonhoeffer_Booklet_NATIONAL.pdf), foreword, 9, 14-15, 16-17, 25.

emulate Bonhoeffer's life of costly grace, "to hear [God's] call to choose him above every other value and principle."<sup>24</sup>

Bonhoeffer's role as a model of personal moral courage is just as clear in a letter to the *Yakima* (WA) *Herald* in November 2019 by Sue Januscheitis, who wrote that because of her convictions, she was "falling into disrepute with my white Republican evangelical friends, but not with my many Christian friends of colour." Her alienation from fellow Christians created a sense of identification with Bonhoeffer, the "dissident who worked to assassinate Hitler and was hanged as a result." I don't expect to be hanged," Januscheitis clarified, "but I will fight for justice even at the cost of old friendships."<sup>25</sup>

## 6. Bonhoeffer and evangelical support for Trump

For better or worse, in the three years between 2017 and 2019 Bonhoeffer's American reception became inextricably intertwined with the growing critique of American evangelicals' support for Donald Trump. This was particularly true when evangelical backing for Trump was compared to the German church's dalliance with Hitler. For instance, in a *Baptist News Global* article published in October 2019, Alan Bean wrote that while American Christians like to celebrate Confessing Church heroes such as Bonhoeffer, Niemüller, and Barth, they consistently ignore the American version of "German Christianity" whose "high priests are men like Jerry Falwell Jr., Franklin Graham and Robert Jeffress." A letter to the *Topeka Capital-Journal* noted how easy it is to forget that, unlike Bonhoeffer, "a large percentage of local Protestant clergy throughout Germany got on the bandwagon of the Third Reich and cheered on Hitler ..." and suggested that

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24 Pat Martin, "God Hears the Cry of the Poor" *National Catholic Reporter* (July 14, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/pencil-preaching/god-hears-cry-poor>.

25 Sue Januscheitis, letter to *Yakima* (WA) *Herald* (November 11, 2019). [Online]. Available: [https://www.yakimaherald.com/opinion/letters\\_to\\_editor/letter-unless-trump-is-impeached-we-ll-become-an-american/article\\_0c7c0007-ea30-57b0-b544-288a67547a3f.html](https://www.yakimaherald.com/opinion/letters_to_editor/letter-unless-trump-is-impeached-we-ll-become-an-american/article_0c7c0007-ea30-57b0-b544-288a67547a3f.html)

we “make sure we are not on the road to repeating some of the atrocities of previous generations.”<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in a November 2019 article comparing “Baptists under Nazism” with “Baptists amid America’s current political crisis” Kristopher Norris cited “After Ten Years” for its applicability both to German Baptists in the 1930s and to “many American Baptist congregations standing on the sidelines today.” “Inactive waiting and dully looking on are not Christian responses,” Norris quoted. “Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers [and sisters], for whose sake Christ suffered.”<sup>27</sup>

As critique of evangelical support for Trump comes increasingly from inside the movement, Bonhoeffer inevitably plays a role. For instance, when a meeting of evangelicals at Wheaton College convened to address support for Trump among evangelicals failed to produce a statement, New Testament scholar Scot McKnight wrote that he was feeling deeply unsettled about the “moral and political fortitude of [his] spiritual community in the era of Trump and beyond.” In McKnight’s opinion, the moment called not for lock-step party loyalty but risk-taking in the spirit of Bonhoeffer and others who have been unafraid to “get political” and challenge unjust systems and policies.<sup>28</sup>

A particularly interesting voice among evangelical critics of Trump is Rob Schenck, director of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute in Washington DC and an increasingly vocal Trump opponent. In a June 2018 *Washington Examiner* interview Schenck revealed his conviction that America under Trump resembled Bonhoeffer’s own time in Germany. Examining the ecclesiastical scene, Schenck concluded that American evangelicals had

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26 Alan Bean, “Silence in the Face of Evil”; Jim McCullough, letter to *Topeka Capital-Journal* (July 3, 2019). [Online]. Available: <http://www.cjonline.com/opinion/20180703/letter-to-editor-remember-your-history>.

27 Kristopher Norris, “Baptists under Nazism and Baptists Amid America’s Current Political Crisis: A Call to ‘Disruption’” *Baptist News Global* (November 21, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://baptistnews.com/article/baptists-under-nazism-and-baptists-amid-americas-current-political-crisis-a-call-to-disruption/#.Xg95RUdKg2x>.

28 Scot McKnight, “The Viability of Evangelicalism,” *Jesus Creed* (blog) (April 26, 2018). [Online]. Available: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/04/26/the-viability-of-evangelicalism/>

not responded well to the “temptation of political idolatry,” and that in many ways what happened to German Christians “was happening to us.”<sup>29</sup>

## 7. The strange case of the Bonhoeffer biographer who shills for Trump

This growing criticism against Trump-supporting evangelicals has affected Bonhoeffer’s American reception in another, less direct way.<sup>30</sup> As Eric Metaxas’s public stature has steadily grown since 2016, commentators have noted the paradox that the man responsible for popularizing a famous anti-Hitler resistor is an also avid supporter of Donald Trump. An April 2017 piece in *The Daily Beast* by Mark Oppenheimer titled “The Holocaust Historian Who Loves Donald Trump” was the first to highlight this paradox. Oppenheimer was puzzled how someone at all familiar with the Nazi era could support an American leader who was not “good for Jews.” As author of a best-selling biography of an anti-Nazi resistor and a New Yorker “literate in Jewish history, and knowledgeable about our struggles,” Metaxas “really should get Jews,” Oppenheimer wrote. But based on their conversations Oppenheimer concluded that Metaxas did not; furthermore, he judged that “to invoke the legacy of Bonhoeffer to explain away support for Trump is a crime against reason, unbecoming a serious thinker.”<sup>31</sup>

In September 2019 Metaxas again came under scrutiny for his vociferous support of Trump. Asked by Bob Smietana of *Religious News Service* what he thought Bonhoeffer would have to say about Trump, Metaxas conceded that “from a cultural point of view, Bonhoeffer would not have been a fan ...” But Metaxas had come to realize that support for Trump was necessary

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29 Brooke Conrad and William Nardi, “Evangelical Christians ‘Sold’ Their Principles in Supporting Trump, says Evangelical Pastor,” *Washington Examiner* (June 2018). [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/evangelical-christians-sold-their-principles-in-supporting-trump-says-evangelical-pastor>.

30 Early in 2020 Metaxas doubled down once again in his support for Trump in an op-ed piece in *The Wall Street Journal* titled “The Christian Case for Trump” (January 7, 2020). [Online]. Available: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-christian-case-for-trump-11578441391>, although this time he did not mention Bonhoeffer.

31 Mark Oppenheimer, “The Holocaust Historian Who Loves Donald Trump” *The Daily Beast* (April 2017). [Online]. Available:

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-holocaust-historian-who-loves-donald-trump>.

because, just like National Socialists in the 1930s, American cultural elites were determined to have their way, even if it means going around the electoral process. Furthermore, just as Bonhoeffer tried to warn the church that his nation was “going ... down in flames,” Metaxas had concluded that Americans would “be hanging our heads in shame for a hundred years” unless they stood up to the left. Even in his “sometimes ham-fisted way,” Metaxas said, Trump was sounding the sort of warning offered by Bonhoeffer.<sup>32</sup>

As 2019 progressed, Metaxas’s radio show and children’s books came under increasing scrutiny. In October, in fact, “The Eric Metaxas Show” made it onto the radar of *Right Wing Watch*, a project of People for the American Way, a progressive group known for its defence of religious liberty. Among Metaxas’s guests that month was Doug Giles, a “right-wing columnist and commentator” who was promoting his book *Would Jesus Vote For Trump?* Not surprisingly, Giles claimed that Jesus would indeed support “the Donald,” mainly because of his “Christ-like sense of boldness” and “prophetic edge.”<sup>33</sup>

Later that month *Right Wing Watch* reported on another of Metaxas’s radio broadcasts, this one featuring Gregg Jarrett, Fox News political analyst and author of *Witch Hunt: The Story of the Greatest Mass Delusion in American Political History*. According to the report, Metaxas said on air that the congressional impeachment inquiry had made Trump the target of a mass delusion campaign akin to Nazi Germany’s that could spell “the end of America.” Trading on his reputation as a Bonhoeffer expert, Metaxas added that the current situation had clear historical parallels: “People often ask the question...how did the Nazis take over Germany? How did it happen? How do people get crazy, and...run toward something that’s a chimera, an illusion, and yet it happens over and over in history?” The clear implication

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32 Bob Smietana, “Eric Metaxas on Trump, Bonhoeffer and the Future of America” *Religious News Service* (September 27, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://religionnews.com/2019/09/27/eric-metaxas-on-trump-bonhoeffer-and-the-future-of-america/>

33 Kyle Mantala, “Doug Giles: Trump Has a Christ-Like Boldness and a Prophetic Edge,” *Right Wing Watch* (October 4, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/doug-giles-trump-has-a-christ-like-boldness-and-a-prophetic-edge/>

was that just this sort of mass psychosis was evident in the impeachment inquiry.<sup>34</sup>

With the release of his 2019 children’s book *Donald Builds the Wall*, more observers considered the paradox of Eric Metaxas. One blogger wrote of being “extremely disappointed (though not surprised)” that the author of a biography of Bonhoeffer had written “something so blatantly xenophobic and contradictory to the biblical commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.” The author retweeted a comment from The Immigration Coalition that characterized *Donald Builds the Wall* as “rooted in hate, racism, generalization, and xenophobia” and concluded “no one should read this.” Another blogger took criticism of *Donald Builds the Wall* even further, noting that the book’s illustrations reminded her of an “original Nazi children’s book” she had come across in her university’s archives. “Reading that Nazi children’s book a decade ago made a bigger impression on me than I’d realized,” she confided. “And I tell you, I am getting the same vibe from Metaxas’ book.”<sup>35</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

In July 2019 an informed and thoughtful essay by Joel Looper titled “How Would Bonhoeffer Vote?” appeared in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. Given the data reviewed here, it would appear to be a question many Americans were asking at the time. Looper’s answer was to apply Bonhoeffer’s own views to the issues likely to shape the 2020 American presidential election.

“With chaos in the White House, human rights abuses happening on the border, and white supremacy on the rise,” Looper wrote, “it seems hard to

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34 Jared Holt, “Eric Metaxas: ‘It’s the End of America’ if Investigations Against Trump Don’t Stop,” *Right Wing Watch* (October 23, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/eric-metaxas-its-the-end-of-america-if-investigations-against-trump-dont-stop/>

35 Moses Lee, “Author of Bonhoeffer Biography Writes a Xenophobic Children’s Book,” *Here, Read This* (November 27, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://herereadthis.blog/2019/11/27/author-of-bonhoeffer-biography-writes-a-xenophobic-childrens-book/>; Libby Anne, “Metaxas’ ‘Donald Builds the Wall’ Recalls Nazi Children’s Books,” *Love, Joy, Feminism* (blog) (November 24, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2019/11/metaxas-donald-builds-the-wall-recalls-of-nazi-childrens-books.html>.

believe Bonhoeffer would not seize the opportunity to vote against Donald Trump.” Surely, he would see the immigration crisis as a “deprivation of human rights that requires the church’s intervention in the form of service and direct action.” On the other hand, Looper countered, Bonhoeffer might view legalized abortion as a clear *status confessionis*, believing that the church would negate its own message if it failed to intervene on behalf of the unborn. For this reason, Bonhoeffer might feel compelled to vote Republican.

Looper’s conclusion was that a full picture of Bonhoeffer’s life and writings makes it difficult for any American political movement to honestly appropriate his legacy, and he reminded believers that “after all, Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran theologian, not an American political operative.”<sup>36</sup> Looper is no doubt right on all counts. But given the state of Bonhoeffer’s American reception “after three years” of the Trump era, the sort of careful analysis of his historical and intellectual contexts recommended by Looper seems less likely in 2020 than it has ever been.

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36 Joel Looper, “How Would Bonhoeffer Vote?” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 31, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/how-would-bonhoeffer-vote/>