

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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CHARLES MARSH is the Commonwealth Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia where he is also the director of the Project on Lived Theology. Marsh spoke with Boisi Center program director **Suzanne Hevelone** and graduate research assistant **Kyle Logan** before his lecture on the experience of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in America.

HEVELONE: You wrote your doctoral dissertation, later published as a book, on Bonhoeffer, and after some time you returned to him. Why did you decide now was the time to return to Bonhoeffer and write *Strange Glory*?

MARSH: My dissertation focused on Bonhoeffer's early philosophical theology. It helped me find ways to build connections between academic theology and life in the church, as well as the church's engagement of the social order. After I finished the first Bonhoeffer book, I turned my attention away from the set of themes that I was exploring in philosophical theology.

I began to address a field of concerns that called me back to my upbringing in the deep South in the late 1960s – the experiences of coming of age in one of the most violent towns in Mississippi and being part of the first integrated class in the state of Mississippi. And also the haunting questions stemming from that time having to do with why zealous, engaged, fervent evangelical Christians – white Southern Baptists in my upbringing – remained indifferent to, if not altogether contemptuous towards, the sufferings of African Americans in the Jim Crow South.

I began to do the work of a theological ethnographer. I had no training in eth-

nography or fieldwork or oral history, but I did have a micro-cassette recorder and I had a lot of questions to ask. I found that having the right set of questions often illuminates the methods that you should employ in doing work in the field.



I thought I was going to write one book on theology and civil rights, and it ended up being a trilogy. I had to learn how to write narrative nonfiction. But I discovered liberation in doing theology as story.

So for twenty years I worked in the areas of American race relations, Christian communities and the relation between theology and social movements. I was interested in reclaiming the narrative of

progressive social involvement, from the secularization that it underwent in the '70s and '80s, and mining the theological, religious, spiritual and philosophical sources of those movements.

During those years, Bonhoeffer remained with me as a fellow traveler, a guide in negotiating my own life as a person of faith. In the months preceding the American preemptive invasion of Iraq in 2003, I found myself falling back into Bonhoeffer's work, as one would cleave to a beacon of light in a time of profound confusion. I summoned Bonhoeffer's story, legacy and thought on numerous occasions to try to mount theological resources against this martial-evangelical Americanized imperial mission.

I'd been teaching Bonhoeffer. I'd been writing on Bonhoeffer. I'd been using Bonhoeffer to think about issues of theology in the public realm. I have to say that my writerly curiosities kept tugging at me to apply some of the same kind of narrative biographical questions I'd done on a smaller scale with Martin King, Clarence Jordan, Fannie Lou Hamer or others.

I realized that I didn't really know who Bonhoeffer was. There's this hagiographic account that we celebrate and that we teach in the churches. The remarkable thing about Bonhoeffer is that no other

religious thinker or Christian thinker or Protestant thinker that I know in the modern era brings so many different communities together. Evangelicals and Catholics and conservatives and liberals and people of faith and humanists and secularists and people from all over the faith and the humanist spectrum love Bonhoeffer.

My curiosity was sparked by this editorial project that I was a part of in its first few years. A group of English-speaking and German-speaking Bonhoeffer scholars launched in the late '80s the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke*, which would become a sixteen volume set of his complete writings. It's now also translated into English, available from Fortress Press.

When I had done research as a doctoral student, I only had Bonhoeffer's major publications and a few other prison fragments of poems and plays and a short novel. But suddenly there's this wealth of letters and journals, sixteen volumes full. And I thought, I want to understand his character. I want to understand who this man was who made this long, beautiful, difficult journey from the golden child of a wealthy German household to a pastor and theologian in the conspiracy who prayed for the defeat of his country and who blessed those who wanted to kill Hitler.

LOGAN: We enjoyed the way that you wrote about Bonhoeffer's experience in America and the way in which he was able to take an influence from both Reinhold Niebuhr and from African American prophetic religion. How did he hold these disparate strands and bring them together in his own thought?

MARSH: Bonhoeffer was always trying to find a way to leave Germany. When you read his letters and look at his journals, you see that he was a restless soul. He had traveled abroad numerous times before he came to America in 1930. He came because it seemed to him that it would be another chapter in his charmed life. He didn't think he had anything to

learn from a country that he said designs its idea of God the way someone orders a car from the factory in Detroit – according to taste and preference. But in fact there were a series of prophetic encounters that to his surprise enabled Bonhoeffer to return to Germany ten months later with a transformed understanding of the vocation of a theologian, of the possibilities of a theological life, of the connection between the church and the social order.

“[Bonhoeffer] wanted to know how to re-experience the mystery and power of the Gospel in a time when the language of the faith has been so profaned and so misused and eviscerated of mystery and power.”

It was encounters from several different aspects of American life in 1930-31. It was the teaching of Reinhold Niebuhr and the American social theologians that defined Union Seminary at the time. Bonhoeffer had never seen any theologians like Niebuhr, who were committed to social reform, who thought that maximum attention to the political and social issues of the day was as important, if not

more so, than parsing sacred doctrine. Niebuhr challenged Bonhoeffer to think more concretely about the connection between doctrines, such as the Lutheran doctrine of justification, and obedience and ethics.

Bonhoeffer encountered members of the American organizing tradition and even participated in their work. There were students at Union, and there were also connections between Union and congregational faith-based innovations in urban areas.

He wasn't terribly impressed by the theological curriculum at Union, and he had some theatrically snarky things to say about it. But he was amazed to see the way that the church exerted such a creative and redemptive influence in the social order. Both in New York and his travels across the country, he observed that influence – and nowhere more intensely than what became for him a five-month immersion in the African American church.

Bonhoeffer had written two dissertations on ecclesiology – the doctrine of the church. They were beautiful in their theological shape and the way they were structured systematically. But the fact is Bonhoeffer had never had an existential individual experience of church. He didn't really like going to church.

An African American seminarian from Birmingham, Alabama, named Franklin Fisher invited this erudite, overly confident – or perhaps arrogant – Berliner to join him one Sunday at Abyssinian Baptist Church. There he heard Adam Clayton Powell Sr. preach, and he continued to attend for the next several months.

Bonhoeffer believed that he had experienced Jesus in a way that was deeply meaningful – that awakened a sense of joy and a sense of passion. He had never felt worship before. Karl Barth once described Northern European Lutheranism as the melancholy of the north German plains.

He found a prophetic voice in the Black Church tradition and in conversations with black intellectuals, who he discovered to be much more engaged and interesting interlocutors than most of the white seminarians at Union. Bonhoeffer returned to Germany with a love of the Bible, an interest in finding ways to create a beloved community in Berlin, to practice this theological vocation he had seen at Union.

One of my favorite images from his later leadership in the church struggle – the so-called *Kirchenkampf* – is that of Bonhoeffer and a group of Lutheran seminarians standing around the piano. They're drinking their good beer and smoking their German cigars. Bonhoeffer is at the piano playing, and they're singing "Go Down, Moses." Bonhoeffer carried back a crate of recordings that he had collected in Harlem to Germany. This is an extraordinary discovery that speaks to the depth of those encounters in America. Many of the same songs that would energize the Civil Rights Movement to come in the United States were at the heart of the German resistance movement.

HEVELONE: Bonhoeffer didn't get to live out his life. His theological career didn't come to full fruition, as it might have if he had lived to be 70 or 80 or 90. What is his legacy as you see it?

MARSH: Bonhoeffer is, in a profound sense, a theologian for our time. He speaks to us as a theologian with extraordinary training in not only modern intellectual thought but in biblical studies and in church history. He's erudite and knowledgeable of the tradition in all of its richness.

At the same time, he's asking and has the courage to ask probing and disarming questions about what it means to live in a world where we don't need the idea of God as a hypothesis to resolve most issues related to science and everyday life. What does it mean to think about God at a time when the Western Christian



project has become myopic and impoverished?

Bonhoeffer spoke of a world come of age, of a religionless Christianity. He wanted to know how to re-experience the mystery and power of the Gospel in a time when the language of the faith has been so profaned and so misused and eviscerated of mystery and power.

He's never afraid to offer radical solutions, as he does in one of his last writings, "Who Is Christ for us Today?" It's an extraordinarily disarming and simple question. What should the church be today? Bonhoeffer answers that question by saying the church should give away all of its money, sell all of its resources and liquidate its property, and that pastors should live a purely secular life and calling.

He's writing this from the ruins of German Lutheranism. He's writing this amidst the ruins of what he's observing as the Western Church. But he's also speaking about his own experience of trying to create spaces of worship, to find places where Christ is present in the world outside of the institutional constraints of Protestantism and Catholicism. That question of where is Christ in the world today is not just in terms of doctrinal assent or in terms of a systematic Christology, but where experientially

might we be encountering God? In one of his last lectures in Berlin, he spoke of the "Christological Incognito." Christ wanders among us as a stranger, as an unfamiliar woman or man in places that we don't historically identify as ecclesial spaces.

The question for me is, how do we think and act in order to align ourselves with the coming generations? This is true particularly for me as a Christian with an evangelical background, teaching at a public university, who is mindful of all of the misuses of the faith. As I get older, I feel a sense of desperation about the state of the world. I take the lessons of Thomas Merton to heart when he says that, as Christians, we need to understand that we don't have all the answers. We need to engage the world with a chastened faith in that we are willing to lock arms with men and women who come to the work of building beloved community. This includes those from banners other than Christ, from other religious traditions, from purely humanistic sources, who work to promote human flourishing, who work to save and to heal the broken body of creation.

I'm a Christian. I want to think Christianly and theologically about those spaces. Bonhoeffer offers us interesting resources for thinking of this in a way

that doesn't require us to relinquish the Christian language, but in ways that inspire a more generous and chastened Christian witness.

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The Boisi Center
for Religion and
American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

 boisicenter
 @boisi_center
 @boisi_center

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