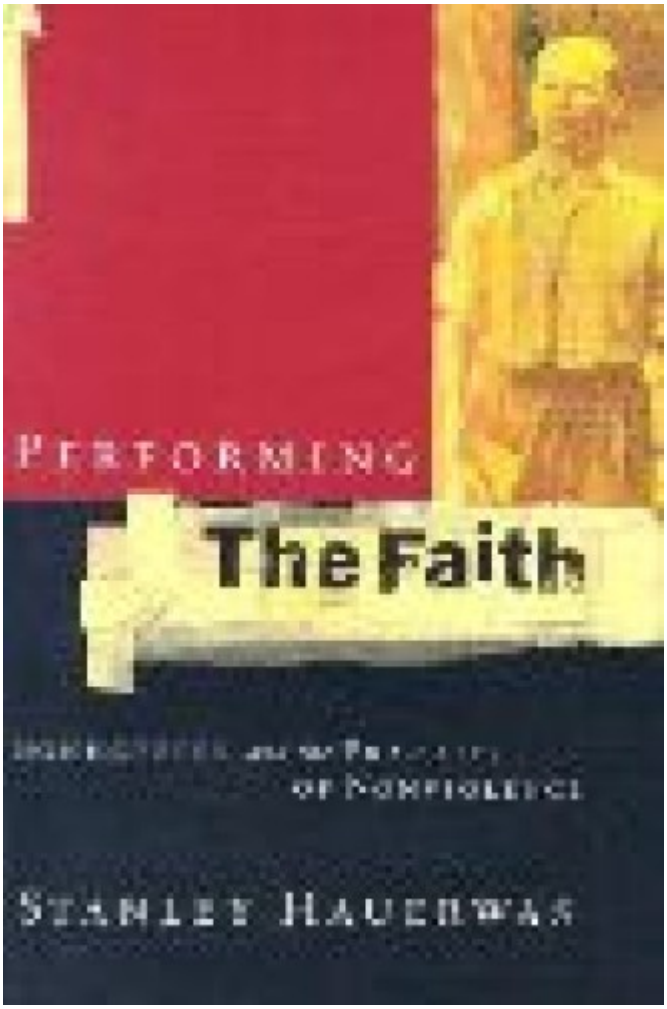
What kind of pacifist?

By John de Gruchy in the July 13, 2004 issue

In Review



Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence

Stanley Hauerwas
Brazos

Stanley Hauerwas and I first met at a conference at Bethel College in Kansas in the early 1980s. I had spent a semester at Bethel some years before when I gave the Menno Simons lectures there (*The Church Struggle in South Africa*), and I remain indebted to that vibrant Mennonite community for introducing me to the writings of John Howard Yoder, with whom I later became well acquainted. Like Hauerwas, I was deeply influenced by Yoder's *Politics of Jesus*, one of the seminal theological texts of the 20th century. But unlike Hauerwas, who reads Dietrich Bonhoeffer through the eyes of Yoder and in the context of a North American Christendom imperium, I read Yoder under the influence of Bonhoeffer and in the context of the South African church struggle.

During that first stay at Bethel I gave a series of talks on Bonhoeffer and Anabaptism, having written my dissertation on the ecclesiologies of Barth and Bonhoeffer some years before. I had done something similar when, in 1963, as a student in Chicago I had visited Reba Place Fellowship, an intentional community in suburban Evanston, and discovered among its members a great interest in Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, but an equally passionate aversion to his involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler. Such principled pacifism was something new to me. But by the time I gave my talks at Bethel, I virtually espoused that position. What held me back from full commitment was Bonhoeffer's "ethic of free responsibility," that is, his "boundary ethics," what Barth called the *Grenzfall*.

In later years I had several opportunities, in South Africa and elsewhere, to discuss Bonhoeffer with Yoder. His monograph *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* had awakened me to the dangers of the *Grenzfall* "as a tool of ethical thought." His critique of Reinhold Niebuhr, not unlike that of Bonhoeffer's, had also alerted me to the dangers of "political realism." Yet, as Yoder discovered on his visits to South Africa in the late 1970s, his principled pacifism was hotly contested. The main liberation movement, the ANC, long committed to nonviolent resistance under the influence of Gandhi and its Christian roots, had by 1963 decided, after agonizing debate, to engage in an armed struggle. My reading of Bonhoeffer's essay "The Structure of Responsible Life" resonated with the moral arguments put forward by the ANC. Much later I wrote an essay comparing Nelson Mandela's "Speech from the Dock" and Bonhoeffer's essay, pointing out that while the two situations were different, the moral arguments were much the same, and equally compelling.

Back to Hauerwas. *Performing the Faith* is composed of three sections, only the first of which is directly on Bonhoeffer. Indeed, there is no reference to Bonhoeffer beyond page 67, as Hauerwas himself acknowledges. Chapter one provides a good introduction to Bonhoeffer's life and the development of his theology, and chapter two a helpful and provocative introduction to his political ethics. Well written, these chapters offer a fresh and challenging perspective on Bonhoeffer.

The rest of the book is made up of essays and papers on various topics related to the practice of nonviolence and truth in the political arena, each written with the sharp insight and passion characteristic of Hauerwas's writings. There are chapters engaging Thomas Aquinas, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Victor Preller, Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Milbank; one on penal justice; two, including a sermon, on September 11, 2001; and a postscript on Jeff Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. There is also an excellent account of "suffering beauty" that Hauerwas evocatively deals with in relation to "the liturgical formation of Christ's body." This chapter could well be expanded into a book dealing with some of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on "aesthetic existence." But let me concentrate on Hauerwas's account of Bonhoeffer's approach to politics and especially the question of nonviolence.

Unlike some who notoriously made critical misuse of Bonhoeffer at a time when we were all being "honest to God," Hauerwas has revisited much of the literature pertinent to the issues. But he makes no claim to be a Bonhoeffer scholar, and he expresses the hope that "those who are tell me where I may or may not have gotten Bonhoeffer wrong." At the same time he suggests that his "account of Bonhoeffer offers a different perspective on his work." Indeed, he writes: "I hope my account of Bonhoeffer makes life difficult for my critics who hold Bonhoeffer in high regard but dismiss me as a 'sectarian.' If I am right about Bonhoeffer, then they must equally dismiss Bonhoeffer." But, of course, it is not quite so straightforward and simple as that. We are all "sectarians" in some sense or other, and every interpretation of Bonhoeffer is precisely that.

Hauerwas is right: the world must be allowed to remain the world, to be secular; the church must seek to be the church, always in the world while struggling not to be of it, and always a visible community committed to the truth. Hauerwas's reading of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, essentially a "free church" one, resonates with my own, but is not entirely faithful to all the data. But there can be no doubt about the intrinsic connection between "telling the truth" and acting nonviolently. "I argue," Hauerwas writes, "that the church gives no gift to the world in which it finds itself

more politically important than the formation of a people constituted by the virtues necessary to endure the struggle to hear and speak truthfully to one another." Yet, as Bonhoeffer recognized, what it means to "tell the truth" is by no means always obvious. Is it sometimes better for a good man to tell a lie than for a liar to tell the truth, as Bonhoeffer suggests? Read Hauerwas to find out how a Yoder reading would resolve that conundrum.

The sharpest point of disagreement concerns the question whether Bonhoeffer's involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler signaled a shift away from his earlier pacifist commitment. This raises an important question, namely, what kind of pacifist was Bonhoeffer?

Given that his ethic was not an "ethic of principles," it is difficult to conceive of him as a "principled pacifist" in Yoder's sense. There was no doubt in the minds of Anabaptist scholars such as Guy Hershberger that this was the case, and it was certainly the opinion of Eberhard Bethge. It is also the opinion of most other students of Bonhoeffer, including Larry Rasmussen, whose work Hauerwas rightly holds in high regard (though I am not sure he is acquainted with Rasmussen's most recent discussion of the issues). Hauerwas is inclined differently. Let us not underestimate the difference, but let us also not allow that difference to cloud the issues that now face us in a world hell-bent on "war on terror."

If we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously, are we not mandated to a life of nonviolence? Should we not be engaged in peacemaking as our Christian vocation? Should not the church be a visible alternative to the world and its ways? On this we must surely agree. But there remains the nagging question that never seems to go away when you are faced, as Bonhoeffer was, with a tyrant in your own backyard (not thousands of miles away) intent on destroying the world and annihilating all those who stand in his way. In this regard I am sorry that Hauerwas did not give us his perspective on Bonhoeffer's "Structure of Responsible Life," a text that, as far as I can tell, did not inform his discussion very much—for reasons that are not clear to me.

Bonhoeffer's reluctant involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler certainly does not provide unambiguous Christian justification for resorting to violence and war. He knew only too well that even a "just war" is still war with all its awful consequences. Rather, Bonhoeffer confronts us as someone who, in following Christ, made a personally costly decision that doing nothing to rid the world of Hitler was worse than doing what he did, however ambiguous the moral issues. That is what

peacemaking demanded of him at that time and place. In making that decision he could only “sin boldly” and cast himself on the grace of God.