

## DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, A “LIVING DEAD” IN AFRICA

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Abstract: As an authentic “living dead,” the impact of Bonhoeffer is so vibrant that his life and thought engage, and are engaged by, many theologians in Africa. Bonhoeffer’s troublesome witness to Christ and the concreteness of his theo-ethical themes, such as the cost of discipleship, the reality of Christ, church as community for the other, the confession of guilt, and the struggle for human rights, justice, and freedom, are what impact theologians in their task of constructing theology for Africa. Bonhoeffer’s life and thought have not only produced De Gruchy, a South African Bonhoeffer scholar of international repute, but also have brought about radical social reformation in Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular. Hardly anyone engages Bonhoeffer’s life and thought and remains the same! This is what Bonhoeffer is up to as a “living dead.” He impacts not just theological thinking and sociopolitical situations, but also lives in South Africa and beyond. But it is not simply Bonhoeffer as a living dead who continues to transform lives, but the living Christ himself through Bonhoeffer’s life and thought.

### INTRODUCTION

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian, born on February 4th, 1906, in Breslau, Germany. He studied at the universities of Tübingen and Berlin, where he received a doctorate in 1927 at the age of twenty-one. Bonhoeffer worked with the “Confessional Church” which resisted the fascist idolatry of the Nazi state religion, and founded an underground seminary at Finkenwalde, where he formed pastors spiritually and theologically for the Confessional Church until 1937.<sup>1</sup> After an abortive assassination attempt on Hitler’s life in 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo on charges of supporting Jews and sabotaging the despotic policies of the Nazis. On April 9, 1945, he was hanged at Flossenbürg concentration camp for involvement in the conspiracy.<sup>2</sup> The death of Bonhoeffer, which often is seen as iconic of resistance against Hitler and Nazism, is also viewed as a martyr for the oppressed and vulnerable. John W. de Gruchy writes, “Bonhoeffer’s death was that of a martyr because he died on behalf of the weak, despised, and suffering ones, and in so doing affirmed God’s love for all in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer died in Germany many decades ago, but his life and thought exert pervasive influence all over the world, and in Africa in particular.

Bonhoeffer, who had little or no contact with Africa during his lifetime, wields enormous influence on the continent’s theology and context.<sup>4</sup> Though Bonhoeffer passed away many years ago in

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, eds., *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 24-27.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 38-44.

<sup>3</sup> John W. de Gruchy, “The Reception of Bonhoeffer’s Theology,” in De Gruchy, John W, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>4</sup> I have made specific references to South Africa in this paper because Bonhoeffer has a more pervasive influence there than any country in Africa. Yet Bonhoeffer has great potential for influence in Africa beyond South Africa because the continent is bedeviled by sociopolitical realities that the life and thought of Bonhoeffer address.

Europe, his influence is felt afresh in African theology<sup>5</sup> today as it had been in the past in his context. Thus, Bonhoeffer is what Africans would call one of the "living dead," whose life and thought continually speak to every aspect of public life in the continent. As a "living dead," whose influential works include *Life Together*, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer still speaks through his life and thought to people who experience suffering, injustice and oppressive situations today. In this article, I will examine the enduring impact of Bonhoeffer's life and theo-ethical thought in Africa, with specific examples from South Africa. In the first section of this article, I explore the reception and interpretation of Bonhoeffer's life and thought in Africa. In the second section, I describe the impact of Bonhoeffer's life and ethical thought on African social transformation. In the third section, I unearth reasons that underscore this compelling impact of Bonhoeffer in the African context.

## THE RECEPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF BONHOEFFER

As one of the most internationally known theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bonhoeffer's exemplary life and works are accepted beyond the confines of his immediate environment—Germany. What makes Bonhoeffer attractive worldwide are his definite theological and philosophical reflections. These reflections touch on key theological themes, but also address the burning issues of the contemporary world. De Gruchy contends, "His life was such a quality that it continually attracts biographers, novelists, dramatists and film makers, just as his poetry has inspired composers."<sup>6</sup> Even many years after his demise, Bonhoeffer's life and thought continue to create an unceasing inspiration for Christians and non-Christians alike around the world. Bonhoeffer never visited or taught in any African theological institution, yet there is probably no European theologian whose life and thought not only speak to the African situation, but also are wholly received in Africa.

Bonhoeffer is inescapably appealing to the laity and clergy alike in Africa, especially in South Africa. In fact, there is probably no country in Africa where Bonhoeffer's witness and thought are welcomed as in South Africa! Describing the reception of Bonhoeffer by South African laymen and women who attended Bethge's lectures of 1973 on the significance of Bonhoeffer for South Africa, De Gruchy writes, "When did Bonhoeffer visit South Africa? He knows our situation from inside!"<sup>7</sup> P.G.J. Meiring also writes "Bonhoeffer, arguably more than any other European theologian, influenced the way in which South African Christians, clergy and laity alike, have come to see their role in the struggle against apartheid."<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer's life and writings provide inexorable inspiration for South African Christians in their struggle not only against the evils of racism, apartheid and oppression, but their fight for justice, peace and liberation. Like the Bible, Bonhoeffer's writings are often read with great *admiration, awe and startling fear!* Meiring, for example, upon reading, *The Cost of Discipleship* for first time, recorded his impression as thus: "I did that, with growing admiration and awe—and consternation, because the implications for South African Christians, in our context, was inescapable. To a young Afrikaner hoping to be ordained into the ministry of the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Bonhoeffer's challenge was quite frightening."<sup>9</sup> He continues "Reading Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* in the months that followed did not help either. The heroism of the prisoner, the messages to his family and friends, the brief—often disturbing— insights into Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thinking, above all his poems, continued to inspire and haunt me."<sup>10</sup> The attraction of Bonhoeffer is therefore not a past

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<sup>5</sup> I do not mean by this phrase a Christian theology written by black theologians alone. I mean any Christian theology constructed on Bonhoeffer's life and thought regarding African situations, whether by white or black theologians.

<sup>6</sup> De Gruchy, "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 94.

<sup>7</sup> John W. de Gruchy "Bonhoeffer in South Africa," edited By John W. de Gruchy in Eberhard Bethge, *Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: Collins, 1975), 26.

<sup>8</sup> P.G.J. Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa: Role Model and Prophet," [www.ve.org.za/index.php/VE/article/download/101/75](http://www.ve.org.za/index.php/VE/article/download/101/75) (accessed February 5, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa."

<sup>10</sup> Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa."

phenomenon, but an ongoing reality in Africa. The socio-economic, political and religious realities of the continent are what account for the continued massive reception of Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer's life and thought are not only accepted, but interpreted in Africa using several metaphors. Here, my concern is not with the debate on whether there is continuity or not discontinuity in his theological formation. Rather, I am concerned with the varied but rich images which theologians use to interpret the legacy of his life and thought. In other words, my concern is to unearth specific images which theologians, clergy and lay people employ to interpret Bonhoeffer as they bring to bear his life and thought on the African situation. One of these images pertains to the depiction of Bonhoeffer's life as the "troublesome witness," a person who risks everything, including his life, in order to witness his own faith, which is centered in Jesus Christ. According to De Gruchy, Bonhoeffer's life and writings were a "troublesome witness to Jesus Christ"<sup>11</sup> in his immediate German situation, and by extension, the African context.

The extent to which Bonhoeffer's life is construed as troublesome for the two contexts is not hard to see. As for Bonhoeffer's situation, De Gruchy suggests "amid growing nationalism and rearmament in Europe, he . . . went against the stream of Germany and other national and church opinion by boldly calling upon the ecumenical movement and its members to outlaw war in the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> At a critical time when rejection of war within the Third Reich was treason, Bonhoeffer championed pacifism and rejected compulsory military service—to the disappointment of his Confessing Church and many of his intimate friends—and stood against the stream, the oppressive powers of the Nazi regime of his day. His involvement with the conspiracy against Hitler's life and its bid to restore the just social order in German society was the most disturbing part of Bonhoeffer's life. Though the failure of the conspiracy led to his execution, Bonhoeffer was a martyr who died vicariously for the victims of oppression. As one who bears "witness unto death" to God's exclusive love for humanity in Christ, Bonhoeffer's life is no doubt a troublesome testimony. As De Gruchy argues, Bonhoeffer's "'witness unto death' [which] . . . is such a radical testimony to the power of the cross[,] . . . is also troublesome because it challenges the depth of our commitment to Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup>

This witness, which is not only challenging but also troublesome in Bonhoeffer's situation, calls for a similar troublesome witness in the African context. In the South African context, De Gruchy suggests that Bonhoeffer's life witness "disturbs us because it points to the death of Jesus in such a way that the message of the cross is no longer separated from the realities of life in the world, including our sociopolitical existence. . . . So Bonhoeffer's witness enables us to discover anew the power of the living Christ in the midst of the contemporary struggles at every level of life."<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer's life was a life in Christ, who let himself be arrested, tried, crucified, and put to death so that he would bring salvation to the victims of oppression. The consistency of Bonhoeffer's life and faith in Christ as demonstrated in his timely and decisive protest against the totalitarian Nazi regime, the denial of rights and the murder of Jews in Germany bear eloquent but troublesome testimony to Christ in an African society ravaged by dictatorial governments and marginalization of the poor. All that Bonhoeffer's witness points to is Christ, not to himself. Therefore, whether in Bonhoeffer or the African context, De Gruchy insists it is not Bonhoeffer but Jesus Christ who attracts and disturbs simultaneously, "calling us into obedient discipleship to proclaim the gospel and to struggle for justice and peace in the world."<sup>15</sup>

The image of Bonhoeffer's personal life is intertwined with his public witness to Jesus Christ in a real-life situation. Seen from this lens, Bonhoeffer's ethical theology is not an abstract reflection detached from the concrete realities of public life in the world. Rather, it is a concrete theology that implicates

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<sup>11</sup> John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 13. De Gruchy suggests Bonhoeffer's life and writings bear troublesome to his friends and enemies alike.

<sup>12</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 14

<sup>13</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 17.

<sup>14</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 19.

every department of life. De Gruchy argues that Bonhoeffer's theology was not something private, esoteric or otherworldly, the kind of theology that is often and erroneously identified with a pious man. Instead, it is "down-to-earth, socially significant and concrete."<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer's theological thought and real-life situations belong together. An authentic theology is one that transforms life and oppressive sociopolitical structures in society. The basis of Bonhoeffer's transformative theology is in the cross, which means for him nothing but God's solidarity with the other—the Jews, the oppressed, and even a conspiracy against the oppressor—in an attempt to remain loyal to Christ. De Gruchy writes, "Because Bonhoeffer's faith, his theology, and his witness are 'thoroughly centred on the person of Jesus Christ,' the crucified Lord, that his life and thought are so challenging and yet so relevant for us today."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Bonhoeffer's life and theology are interpreted as concrete and practical in that they address concrete questions and concerns facing the continent. For example, Bonhoeffer's spectacular metaphor about "putting a spoke in the wheel" of the totalitarian Nazi regime in his 1933 essay on the "Jewish Question" was often appealed to by South African Christians in their struggle against an antiapartheid regime which perpetrated racism and white domination.

Bonhoeffer's life and theology are not only viewed as a solid troublesome witness that impacts the African situation. Bonhoeffer is also employed as a dialogue partner in constructing theology in Africa. Choosing Bonhoeffer as a dialogue partner for doing theology, De Gruchy, a leading African Bonhoeffer scholar, wrote his doctoral thesis, a book, and a series of essays and articles on the enduring significance of Bonhoeffer's life and thought for South Africa.<sup>18</sup> To engage Bonhoeffer in theological dialogue, he argues that we must let Bonhoeffer speak for himself to the context while we pay attention to what he had to say. His dialogue with Bonhoeffer shows, amazingly, not only his excellent grasp of Bonhoeffer's life and theology, but also, intriguingly, his superb support of every claim with numerous direct quotations from Bonhoeffer's original sources.

Engaging Bonhoeffer in theological dialogue does not mean uncritical appropriation of his thought in such a way that his thought is idolized! Rather, it means appropriating Bonhoeffer's theological ideas critically as we reflect on the bible and Christian faith within the African context. De Gruchy argues that for any critical theological dialogue with Bonhoeffer to yield fruitful results for the South African situation, and by extension, the whole of Africa, it must be unpacked at three basic levels: "The first level is that at which we critically investigate Bonhoeffer's theology in its own context; the second level is that of theological reflection on and analysis of our own historical situation; and the third level is that of reflective participation, obedient discipleship, or *praxis*. It is at the third level that the integration takes place, or, to use the language of H.G. Gadamer, 'the horizons are fused.'"<sup>19</sup>

The critical issues which often provoke theologians to bring Bonhoeffer into theological conversation not only vary from one country to another in Africa, but also depend on the time and context in which they exist, coupled with the correspondence between their situation and that of Bonhoeffer. As De Gruchy rightly argues in respect to South Africa, "doing theology in dialogue with Bonhoeffer within the South African context has developed in relation to changing historical circumstances."<sup>20</sup> In West

<sup>16</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 29-30.

<sup>18</sup> These include, among others, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*; "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology"; "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid and Beyond: The Reception of Bonhoeffer in South Africa," in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997); "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Transition to Democracy in the German Democratic Republic and South Africa," *Modern Theology* 12, no. 3 (1996):345-366; "Confessing Guilt in South Africa Today in Dialogue With Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 67 (1989); 37-45; *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition: Papers Presented at the Seventh International Bonhoeffer Congress, Cape Town, 1996* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> John W. de Gruchy, "Christian Witness in South Africa in a Time of Transition," in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. and Charles Marsh (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 283.

Africa, for instance, J.C. Thomas<sup>21</sup> engages Bonhoeffer to address the question of indigenization of Christianity in that African sub-region. According to Thomas, the conspicuous division between black and white churches, which Bonhoeffer observed during his visit to the United States in the 1930s, is similar to the sharp difference which exists between the missionary-founded churches and the African-initiated churches in West Africa.<sup>22</sup> Thomas contends that while the former have not only remained the carbon copies of their founding European mothers in term of liturgy, but also in opposition to African culture (for instance, polygamy) even to this day, the latter have contextualized the gospel by incorporating African cultural practices such as drumming and dancing into their worship services, and accepting divine healing, exorcism and polygamy.<sup>23</sup> Though they have syncretic theology that combines certain aspects of the gospel with traditional practices, they pull a larger following than the historic churches.

In an attempt to resolve this division and the opposition between African culture and Christian faith as seen in these two churches, Thomas engages Bonhoeffer's theology of Christ's lordship into dialogue. He argues that there is no part of reality that is separated from the Lordship of Christ, including even non-Christian religions, which Bonhoeffer viewed "not only as a part of the reality which God has created, but more strongly as something positive which can lead to and inspire a revitalization of Christianity itself."<sup>24</sup> Thomas insists that just as Bonhoeffer believes that Christianity must bear witness to the Lordship of Christ at the center of life, bridging the walls between western secular and African cultures, the fundamental task of Christianity in West Africa is to recognize and realize the reality of Christ's lordship within traditional African culture. On how to resolve the issue of polygamous marriage, which is the most intractable obstacle to the true indigenization of the church in West Africa, Thomas insists on letting Bonhoeffer speak for himself:

We make again and again the surprising and terrifying discovery that the will of God does not reveal itself before our eyes as clearly as we had hoped. This comes about because the will of God seems to be self-contradictory, because two ordinances of God seem to conflict with one another, so that we are not in a position to choose between good and evil, but only between one evil and another. And here it is that the real, the most difficult, problems of ethics lie.<sup>25</sup>

There is also the issue of articulating of contextual ethics in Africa. Elias Bongmba brings Emmanuel Levinas and Bonhoeffer into conversation over the priority of the Other to develop what is called a *contextual ethics of the Other* in Africa. Bongmba claims despite their different understanding of who the Other is, Levinas and Bonhoeffer place high premiums on the Other in dealing with concrete human situations.<sup>26</sup> Drawing on this insight, Bongmba proposes guidelines for African contextual ethics. First, he suggests that a contextual ethics of otherness should be pluralistic enough to be interdisciplinary and interreligious in nature. He also claims that contextual ethics must address the evils of ethnicity and autocracy, for "Bonhoeffer and Levinas teach us to recover difference without enmity or violence by seeing a human Other who is transcendent to us and to the concept of ethnicity."<sup>27</sup> As for autocracy,

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<sup>21</sup> Though Thomas is not an African, but a British Anglican theologian who briefly taught at the University of Ghana in Legon and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, his conversation with Bonhoeffer, which addresses crucial issues facing the West African church, deserves our attention in this article.

<sup>22</sup> J.C. Thomas, "Bonhoeffer's Ethics and the Indigenization of Christianity in West Africa," *Missiology: An International Review*, 14, no.1 (January 1986): 83.

<sup>23</sup> The historic churches have changed since Thomas has written this article. Many historic churches today have embraced the use of African music in worship, healing and deliverance ministry. However, the opposition to certain aspects of African culture is still very strong.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, "Bonhoeffer's Ethics and the Indigenization of Christianity in West Africa," 87.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, "Bonhoeffer's Ethics and the Indigenization of Christianity in West Africa," 90.

<sup>26</sup> Elias Bongmba, "The Priority of the Other: Ethics in Africa—Perspectives from Bonhoeffer and Levinas," in *Bonhoeffer for a New Day: Theology in a Time of Transition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 191.

<sup>27</sup> Bongmba, "The Priority of the Other," 206.

Bongmba writes, "To restore Otherness, multiple political voices must be recognized and guaranteed."<sup>28</sup> Third, suggesting that contextual ethics must prioritize the human Other over unfashionable theory and praxis of ethics in national development, he insists it must challenge the systemic violence of colonialism, harsh climate, corruption and cultural denigration.<sup>29</sup>

The trajectory in Bonhoeffer's life and theology which African Christians found to be fruitful in dialoguing with him also relates to the struggle for peace, justice and liberation. This is true of many South African theologians who engaged in theological dialogue with Bonhoeffer in the struggle against the evil of apartheid, which promoted the discrimination, oppression and marginalization of blacks in South Africa. The 1960s were the most traumatic and turbulent era of apartheid in the political and religious history of South Africa. A.H. Lückhoff reports, for instance, that on March 21, 1960, 69 blacks were massacred while beleaguered policemen wounded 180 at Sharpeville for protesting against the Apartheid Laws.<sup>30</sup> The World Council of Churches intervened by calling on its South African member churches at Cottesloe to unite in the fight against apartheid. Such an incident, which was similar to the situation between Bonhoeffer and the German Evangelical Church in the 1930s,<sup>31</sup> provoked South Africans to engage Bonhoeffer in dialogue as they struggled for peace, justice and equality. Peter Hinchliff records how Christians engaged Bonhoeffer in their battle against apartheid at that critical time:

One can say of Bonhoeffer at least, that as he understood the nature of sin, it is possible to find oneself in a situation where every course open seems sinful.

In South Africa in the early 1960s that seemed a very obvious truth. It was the aftermath of Sharpeville. The horrors of the political situation were inescapable. One was burdened with a terrible sense of responsibility and guilt for a society of which one could not wash one's hands nor do very much to improve. It was also a period when Bonhoeffer's reputation and influence was at its height. It was hardly possible not to look at one's dilemma (even if only at intuitive level) through his eyes.<sup>32</sup>

Although the Dutch Reformed Churches later abandoned Cottesloe's resolution against racism and apartheid and broke their relations with the WCC, the role which dialogue with Bonhoeffer played in this resolution is obvious. In fact, ever since then, dialogue with Bonhoeffer in defying unjust racial laws and policies at both the intellectual and practical level has continued unabated even after abrogation of apartheid in South Africa.

Engaging in dialogue with Bonhoeffer's life and thought in constructing theology for Africa challenges Christians to boldly confront the burning political and social issues of the day. If, for Bonhoeffer, to bear a true Christian witness to Christ in certain settings demanded going against the stream, including conspiracy, the church in South Africa is challenged to exemplify such a "troublesome witness" that calls the evil of apartheid into question. De Gruchy writes, "The true unity of the church is thus the contradiction of apartheid or any division on the basis of race, culture, or class, just as these are antithetical to the reconciliation made possible through the cross of Jesus Christ."<sup>33</sup> He discovers in Bonhoeffer's theology a direction towards liberation for the victims of oppression and their oppressors, who need to be "freed for others"—the black South Africans. He argues that, like Bonhoeffer, who was set free from self-centeredness by grace for Christ and the other—the oppressed Jews, "white South Africans need to be set free [from racism,] that which prevents them from hearing the gospel. They cannot change unless they come to terms with reality and are willing to forsake responsible freedom that is the gift of God's grace in Christ."<sup>34</sup> On whether or not the church within the context of South African has every theological justification to participate in civil disobedience to oust an unjust racial regime,

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<sup>28</sup> Bongmba, "The Priority of the Other," 207.

<sup>29</sup> Bongmba, "The Priority of the Other," 108.

<sup>30</sup> A.H. Lückhoff, *Cottesloe* (Kapaastad: Tafelberg, 1978), 1.

<sup>31</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> P. Hinchliff, *Holiness and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 104-105.

<sup>33</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 77.

Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot to kill Hitler provided fertile ground for theological dialogue! As Bonhoeffer went beyond his Prussian Lutheran tradition to a more Reformed position in dealing with the question of civil disobedience, De Gruchy argues that conservative Calvinism, which emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the liberty of conscience, provides freedom for Christians to disobey unjust laws in the name of God's justice.

Even during the time of transition from racial to non-racial public service and just democratic rule, Bonhoeffer's theology of the public role of the church and his Christian witness to peace was employed for the restructuring of the South African society from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's idea of viewing mighty events of world history from below, De Gruchy suggests that the church is called to stand in critical solidarity with the victims of oppression by struggling for justice, truth and freedom.<sup>35</sup> Democracy cannot flourish in a context characterized by injustice and grave disparity between the rich and the poor. As for the total healing of the country from the devastating injuries of apartheid, appeals were made to Bonhoeffer's connection of confession of guilt with concrete action of restitution and reparation. De Gruchy writes, "Unless there is a confession of by white South Africa, a confession in which the church should be at the forefront, and unless such a confession is embodied in the fundamental restructuring of the economy of the land and making significant reparation for past oppression, the country cannot be healed."<sup>36</sup>

Theological dialogue with Bonhoeffer is discovered to be viable even in post-apartheid South Africa. The challenge that the country faced after apartheid was the quest for a community that would be both local and national in character. Rüssel Botman claims that building of local communities and nation building belong together. He believes that Bonhoeffer is in a better position to assist "on the road to community after apartheid because he understood the crucial task of relating community to Christology and to democracy."<sup>37</sup> After the bitter experiences of apartheid, Botman claims that the ultimate question which South African Christians face in the two decades of their young democracy is Bonhoeffer's question "Are we still of any use?" Botman, who suggests that the question is about the identity of community, gives the answer in the affirmative. He draws on Bonhoeffer's question "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?," which inquires into the boundaries of human existence. He argues that the post-apartheid quest for a sense of community, which relates to boundaries of one's identity, should be rooted in Bonhoeffer's religious question of love for the neighbor. Botman writes, "Sensing that democracy and structural changes in themselves do not secure just participatory and responsible people Bonhoeffer centralizes the 'who' question in his conception of the building of community. *Building of community requires a people's theology, a 'who' theology.*"<sup>38</sup>

Botman claims that for Bonhoeffer, just as Christ exists as community, the whole of humanity, including Christians, are called to "life together." He asserts that Bonhoeffer's theology of Christ existing as community goes beyond mere demolishing of the gap between the rich and poor, i.e., economic development in a democratic society. Though Bonhoeffer would argue that the church can't provide solutions to economic problems so to speak, this is the task of other commands such as family and state. Yet, Botman writes, "The truest answer to poverty is not economic growth, but rather community, participation and solidarity.... The poor people of the South will have to forge their lives together, believing in Christ existing as base community at the centre of modern history."<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer's concern in the Weimar-democracy was about people rather than structures and reconstruction. As his organic approach to community is rooted in communitarian Christology, Botman claims, "*For our common future we are thrown back on Jesus Christ existing as community and on our African resources of Ubuntu.*"

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<sup>35</sup> De Gruchy, "Christian Witness in South Africa in a Time of Transition," in *Theology and the Practice of Responsibility: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 287.

<sup>36</sup> De Gruchy, "Christian Witness in South Africa," 290.

<sup>37</sup> Rüssel Botman, "Who is 'Jesus Christ as Community' for us Today? The Quest for Community: A Challenge to Theology in SA," *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 97 (March 1997): 31.

<sup>38</sup> Botman, "Jesus Christ as Community," 32-33. The italics are theirs.

<sup>39</sup> Botman, "Jesus Christ as Community," 37.

According to Dirkie Smit, this demands "learning to live with the other," which is the fundamental challenge facing South African Christians and theologians arising from Bonhoeffer's legacy. Smit expresses it so persuasively that one has no option but to quote him:

The kind of Christians, the kind of human beings, the kind of South Africans, and the kind of moral communities that we need in South Africa in order for the church *to be* the church, with truthfulness and integrity, is the ability to live "*after Babel*," the ability to live together in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "large house," the ability to serve community instead of chaos. We shall have to become people who can learn to live with strangers, who are willing to accept others, who are able to understand people who speak different languages . . . and to cooperate, to live and to work with them. The notion that this is a fundamental part of the calling, of the responsibility of Christians, is very much part of Bonhoeffer's legacy to the church.<sup>40</sup>

Bonhoeffer's concept of critical solidarity is used to articulate the role which the church should play in transition to democracy and transformation of the post-apartheid South African community. The church should support every initiative that would usher in a new just social order and to take sides with people who remain oppressed in one form or another in a new democratic society. The church participating with them in their robust struggle for justice, human dignity, and liberation may accomplish such a role.<sup>41</sup> Just like Bonhoeffer, whose contribution to the democratic transition of Germany affirms the tenets of democracy such as human rights and rule of law without endorsing its threat to common good,<sup>42</sup> the church's contribution to the realization of democratic transformation in society is to affirm human freedom and equality before the law without encouraging possessive individualism and condoning injustice.

For Neville Richardson, the type of church which is needed in a post-apartheid South Africa, where the prophetic voice of the church is ebbing away and secularization is eroding the sense community and relegating religion to personal domain, is Bonhoeffer's idea of the church, Christ existing as a community for the other. This is the church that is visible, united, hopeful and proactive in public life for the sake the other—the poor and marginalized—and not for itself. Richardson writes, ". . . its prophetic witness will be powerfully expressed in more than words alone. Such a church will be not only a visible witness to the presence of Christ in the world but, as Bonhoeffer would insist, a pointer to the world of its own true reality and centre."<sup>43</sup> Bonhoeffer's life and thought therefore not only exercises influence on African theology, but on socio-political transformation in Africa.

## BONHOEFFER'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Bonhoeffer's witness and theology played a huge role in the social transformation in Africa. Social transformation cannot take place in human society without a change of perception. Therefore, the impact of Bonhoeffer's witness and theology on African social transformation must be viewed first and foremost from the way it transforms peoples' perceptions of things from above to below. As De Gruchy accurately points out, for us, his [Bonhoeffer's] challenge has been, and remains, above all else to see things from below, from the perspective of those who suffer. This, I suggest, is where the legacy of Bonhoeffer has had a particular impact, both consciously and unconsciously, on those South African Christians who, first

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<sup>40</sup> Dirkie Smit, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and 'The Other,' 'Accept One Another, Therefore . . . ' (Rom.15:7)," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 93 (December 1, 1995): 15.

<sup>41</sup> John W. De Gruchy, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Transition to Democracy in the German Democratic Republic and South Africa," *Modern Theology*, 12 no.3 (July 1996): 357-358.

<sup>42</sup> Even though Bonhoeffer was not a liberal democrat in the sense of the word, it does not mean that he rejected the true tenets of liberal democracy. He was critical of liberal democracy in so far as it places individual good over and above the nation.

<sup>43</sup> Neville Richardson, "Sanctorum Communio in a Time of Reconstruction? Theological Pointers for the Church in South Africa," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 27 (March 2007): 115.



began to listen to the black voice; who secondly, recognized the legitimacy of the liberation struggle; and thirdly identified, however inadequately, with that movement.<sup>44</sup>

The thinking of highly placed people was revolutionized. They were challenged to look at things from a radically different perspective than their own. Bonhoeffer inspired the highly placed and powerful in society not only to descend to the level of the marginalized, but also empowered them to share their rights, privileges and powers with the poor and powerless. Such a radical change of perception is rooted in the change that the cross has caused in our understanding of God in Jesus Christ.

Although public activism of South Africa went well beyond Bonhoeffer's, those whose perceptions have been changed embraced Bonhoeffer as a role model and became agents of social transformation in their countries. Like Bonhoeffer, they become involved in the struggle for justice and freedom in their attempt to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ in various contexts. Prominent among them was Beyers Naudé, who is often referred as the "Bonhoeffer of South Africa." Comparing Naudé with Bonhoeffer, De Gruchy suggests that "we cannot be true to the story of the church struggle in South Africa if we fail to note Naudé's Bonhoeffer-like role . . . the fact that both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Beyers Naudé sought to be faithful in their witness to Jesus Christ within their respective contexts, and that their contexts—Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa—bore a striking resemblance."<sup>45</sup> Naudé not only called for the formation of a "confessing church" in South Africa, but also inspired the publication of *Message to the People of South Africa* in 1968, which, like the Barmen Declaration, with which Bonhoeffer identified himself, declared that the policy of apartheid was incompatible with the gospel, and hence, a false ideology. The signatories of this declaration, which cut across all denominations, may be seen as the birth of the ecumenical movement in South African geared towards fighting a common cause.

Bonhoeffer's impact is also felt even outside theological circles. According to Meiring, "Bonhoeffer's inspiration also reached non-theologians in the struggle. . . . Mandela's famous *Speech from the Dock* before his conviction and imprisonment was compared to Bonhoeffer's essay on *The Structure of Responsible Life*. And when Steve Biko, foremost spokesperson of the Black Consciousness Movement died at the hands of policemen, his death was immediately compared with that of Bonhoeffer."<sup>46</sup> Though it is an exaggeration, Cornel du Toit describes Biko as an "African Bonhoeffer." He writes, "In a situation of state terrorism both had the guts to rebel against the powers that be, knowing full well that it jeopardized their lives—which was proved only too true. Both martyrs' protest set an example to humanity for the rest of time."<sup>47</sup>

Even the emergence of black theology and liberation theology, which seek to answer questions raised by the poor in their daily struggle for justice and liberation from oppression, is in a way linked to the impact of Bonhoeffer's life and thought. Even though Bonhoeffer was not a liberation theologian in the true sense of the word, the traces of liberation theology are found in his life and thought.<sup>48</sup> This brand of theology provided South African theologians in particular with a paradigm to critique apartheid that caused popular resistance, which eventually led to its demise. The critical roles played by Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak in the abolition of apartheid cannot be divorced from their roles as liberation as well as black theologians. We cannot ignore the key role by De Gruchy in the struggle for the abolition of the apartheid and peaceful reconciliation of whites with blacks under post-apartheid government in South African. He engaged Bonhoeffer's life and thought more than any theologian in Africa, which made this social transformation in South Africa a reality. Stating the impact of Bonhoeffer in South Africa, Susan Rakoczy suggests that "Bonhoeffer's vision of new forms of community life as essential for formation for

<sup>44</sup> De Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond," 359.

<sup>45</sup> De Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond," 355.

<sup>46</sup> Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa."

<sup>47</sup> Cornel du Toit, "Black Consciousness as an Expression of Radical Responsibility: Biko an African Bonhoeffer," *Research Institute for Theology and Religion: University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa*, <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/4334/Du%20Toit.pdf?sequence=1>, (accessed January 30, 2012).

<sup>48</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 68.

ministry have taken root in various churches who now have houses of studies/ formation communities for their ministerial candidates. This has always been true in the Catholic Church, but now leaders of other Christian bodies speak about 'formation issues.'"<sup>49</sup>

Bonhoeffer's contributions to democratic transition and restoration of peace and reconciliation in African countries ravaged by racial and ethnic conflicts and military dictatorship cannot be overemphasized. For example, instead of investigating and punishing perpetrators of apartheid in the 1990s, an act which would jeopardize South African's nascent democracy, De Gruchy reports that Bonhoeffer's theology of confession, which insists that only a genuine confession of guilt can restore a nation's humanity, led to the formation of the Commission on Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa.<sup>50</sup> The aim of the commission, according to De Gruchy, was "not just to turn former enemies into compatriots, but the restoration of the humanity of a nation which had been torn apart by racism, greed and violence."<sup>51</sup> According to De Gruchy, just as Bonhoeffer suggests that the church must take the lead in dealing with the past through vicarious confession of guilt for its own failures and those of the entire society, the Rustenburg conference's declaration of 1990 confessed not just the sins of colonial and apartheid church, but also the sins of the victims of apartheid who tolerated the sins of white oppression.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, Nigeria inaugurated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the beginning of its transition to democracy in 1999 in the fashion of that of South Africa. The Commission was formed to investigate human rights abuses in Nigeria during the period of military rule. Even though one would ordinarily think this was just the imitation of a South African phenomenon, in all of this, Bonhoeffer's influence was profound by extension! The outstanding performance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa under the exceptional chairmanship of Desmond Tutu has inspired the call for its formation in other countries like Rwanda, Uganda and Sierra Leone,<sup>53</sup> which have been torn apart by ethnic genocide and civil wars. This begs the question of why Bonhoeffer's life and theology are influential both in theory and reality, and within academia, church and society alike.

## THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF BONHOEFFER'S IMPACT

There is no one who makes history in isolation from the other. Hence, the wide impact of Bonhoeffer's life and thought in the contemporary world, and Africa in particular, does not just occur; there are people who play an instrumental role in making it a reality. Bonhoeffer died without writing a "systematic theology," although his *Ethics* comes very close to it. This does not mean that his theology is not systematic or incoherent; rather, it means he did not leave behind a common book in which his theological ideas are expressed into a unified "system of thought."<sup>54</sup> What he left behind was fragments of writings ranging from his dissertations, lectures, papers and prison correspondences to his family, friends, students etc. These fragments of writings are significant for contemporary theology. But they would have either been forgotten or relegated to the annals of history if not for his intimate friend, Eberhard Bethge. Bethge is the major preserver, transmitter and interpreter of many of Bonhoeffer's writings. De Gruchy rightly argues, "Bethge has not only helped to define the contours of the scholarly debate, but also been instrumental in enabling many to discover the relevance of Bonhoeffer's theology to the life and witness of the church in many different contexts around the world."<sup>55</sup> He also claims the Bethge has been the most important

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Rakoczy, "The Witness of Community Life: Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* and the Taizé Community," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 127 (March 2007): 61.

<sup>50</sup> De Gruchy "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond," 361.

<sup>51</sup> John W. De Gruchy, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Transition to Democracy in the German Democratic Republic and South Africa," 357-358.

<sup>52</sup> De Gruchy "Bonhoeffer, Apartheid, and Beyond," 362.

<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa, A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 40.

<sup>54</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> De Gruchy, "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 96.

interpreter of Bonhoeffer "through his numerous writings, his extensive lectures tours . . . and, perhaps above all, his monumental biography *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary*."<sup>56</sup> De Gruchy's interest itself in Bonhoeffer's significance for the South African situation was provoked by one such lecture. Bethge's lectures on the consequence of Bonhoeffer's witness and theology for South Africa in 1973 have contributed enormously to the impact of Bonhoeffer not just on South Africa, but the entirety of Africa.<sup>57</sup>

Bonhoeffer was not an "ivory tower" theologian. He did not construct his theology from abstract speculation; rather, it arose from his encounter with real-life situations. This ranges from his freedom, pastoral ministry, travels, and imprisonment to death by hanging. For him, theology is not simply an academic exercise; it's about bearing faithful witness and obedience to Jesus Christ in a way that engages the sociopolitical realities of the world. Bonhoeffer's theology and witness arose from his faithful struggle for justice and liberation from the oppressive Nazi regime of his day.<sup>58</sup> It naturally impacts the African context, which is bedeviled by oppressive governments, ethnic and racial violence. The correlation of his life and theology with real life-situations exerts an enormous impact on African thought and situations! In other words, the fact that Bonhoeffer's life and theology are bound up with real-life situations is a matter of inspiration in Africa. As De Gruchy says, the reasons why Bonhoeffer is relevant for the South African situation is "because he confronts us with the uncomfortable question: 'who is Jesus Christ *for us today*?' He does not answer the question for us, but he demonstrates in his own thought and supremely with his life what the right answer was for him in a variety of situations."<sup>59</sup>

Bonhoeffer's willingness to die to prevent the Nazi pogrom against the Jews, his dream for a worldwide friendship of humanity, his willingness to do everything humanly and morally possible to achieve that aim, and his concern for the essential Christian values of peace, justice and freedom, have had a far-reaching impact on Africa. Bonhoeffer's letters have inspired his African readers to take related risks and actions to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed in their struggle for justice and freedom.<sup>60</sup> As noted somewhere in this article, his readers in South Africa, for example, have come to love and to follow him. During the struggle for justice and emancipation from apartheid in South Africa, many Christians were arrested, tried and convicted, for instance, Beyers Naudé.<sup>61</sup> Such people must have found Bonhoeffer's prison letters and papers to be like passages of the bible, giving them the fortitude to face death without losing hope. Bonhoeffer's radical example of obeying Christ even "unto death" by hanging and his resistance to Nazi despotism inspired many in Africa to follow suit.<sup>62</sup> Gudina Tumsa was in many ways an "incarnation" of Bonhoeffer's life and thought in Ethiopia. Tumsa articulated down-to-earth public theology, which engaged the socio-political situation of Ethiopia. Tumsa believed, preached, and bore faithful witness to the liberating power of the gospel in the face of the oppressive communist regime of his day. In the spirit of Bonhoeffer, Tumsa audaciously resisted this regime and was executed.

The remarkable semblance which exists between Bonhoeffer's situation in Germany during the Third Reich and that of apartheid in South Africa also accounts for why Bonhoeffer's theology and witness exert considerable impact. As Neville Richardson writes, "During the apartheid era parallels were often drawn between the South African and Nazi regimes. It was against that background that Bonhoeffer became popular among anti-apartheid theologians."<sup>63</sup> Though anti-Semitism, which claimed five million lives, cannot be equated with the violence which apartheid caused, certainly apartheid has an ideological

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<sup>56</sup> De Gruchy, "Reception of Bonhoeffer's Theology," 97.

<sup>57</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 721.

<sup>59</sup> De Gruchy "Bonhoeffer in South Africa," 27.

<sup>60</sup> *Hermes Donald Kreilkamp, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Prophet of Human Solidarity,"*  
<http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/843625kreilkamp.html>, (accessed on January 10, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa."

<sup>62</sup> Meiring, "Bonhoeffer in South Africa."

<sup>63</sup> Richardson, "Sanctorum Communio," 99.

link with National Socialism. That is, it banned civil rights as a way to enforce its ideology. Desmond Tutu describes apartheid "as vicious, as evil, as unchristian and as immoral as Nazism."<sup>64</sup> Like in Germany, the context in which Bonhoeffer lived and witnessed the gospel, the apartheid period in South Africa was characterized by racism. Racism was used as the dominant yardstick for human rights, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without fair trial of the critics of apartheid policy. It was also used to perpetuate the huge disparity between the rich and the poor.

Bonhoeffer's spectacular struggle to restore just social order in the German context makes his witness and theology to command an enduring impact in the South African situation and elsewhere in Africa. Rakoczy suggests, "A clear link between Bonhoeffer's prophetic vision and the South African struggle is seen in the similarities between the Barmen Declaration of 1934 and the Kairos Document of 1985.... The Kairos Document, written in the spirit of the Barmen Declaration, confronted South African Christians with the stark contrasts between 'State,' 'Church' and 'Prophetic' theologies and placed the choice before them."<sup>65</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As an authentic "living dead," the impact of Bonhoeffer is so vibrant that his life and thought engage, and are engaged by, many theologians in Africa. Bonhoeffer's troublesome witness to Christ and the concreteness of his theo-ethical themes, such as the cost of discipleship, the reality of Christ, church as community for the other, the confession of guilt, and the struggle for human rights, justice, and freedom, are what impact theologians in their task of constructing theology for Africa. Many theologians invoke these essential themes in addressing the issues of indigenization of Christianity, apartheid, human rights abuses, contextual ethics and developing a theology of the church as the community for the poor and the oppressed in Africa. In doing so, Bonhoeffer's witness and theology have been and are still being used to challenge racism, apartheid, oppressive governments, ethnic violence and injustice in Africa.

Bonhoeffer's life and thought have not only produced De Gruchy, a South African Bonhoeffer scholar of international repute, but also have brought about radical social reformation in Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular. By and large, Bonhoeffer's life and theology have the power to transform life. Whoever reads Bonhoeffer's witness theology without radicalizing his or her life and thinking has not really read Bonhoeffer. Hardly anyone engages Bonhoeffer's life and thought and remains the same! This is what Bonhoeffer is up to as a "living dead." He impacts not just theological thinking and sociopolitical situations, but also lives in South Africa and beyond. But it is not simply Bonhoeffer as a living dead who continues to transform lives, but the living Christ himself through Bonhoeffer's life and thought.

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<sup>64</sup> De Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa*, 39.

<sup>65</sup> Rakoczy, "Witness of Community Life," 61-62.