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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Strange Glory' by Charles Marsh

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a man of contradictions—and his theology the essential response to modernity.

By CHRISTIAN WIMAN

May 30, 2014 5:30 pm ET

When I was a kid growing up in the Baptist badlands of far West Texas in the 1980s, the only serious theologian I ever heard a word about was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This was odd in one sense. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran, and his theology was stringent, complex and fraught with a kind of vital void, a meaning in meaninglessness that Christians were just beginning to piece together from the shards of modernism and its tidal violence. By contrast, the sermons I heard in Texas tended toward fire-eyed warnings of the Rapture or clear-cut moral imperatives about fornication (bad) or football (good).

Strange Glory

By Charles Marsh
Knopf, 515 pages, \$35

In another sense, though, the reference was apt, for Bonhoeffer (1906–45) was Christocentric to a secularly alarming degree, and so were we. He believed that God's remoteness was woven into the

flesh and blood of living existence and that, moreover, "we are torn out of our own existence and set down in the midst of the holy history of God on earth." For Bonhoeffer, the church must penetrate every aspect of the lives of its parishioners; either it acknowledges and answers intractable human suffering and from that suffering wrings a strain of real joy and hope, or it is simply an easy extension of secularism and thus an abomination. That image of the upright, uptight, Yankee Episcopalian sitting rigid in his pew—God's frozen people and all that—well, let's just say that occasionally Bonhoeffer provided our more apocalyptic preachers with some potent rhetorical ammunition.

Plus, his was one hell of a story. There was the little boy with the taste for eternity deciding at 13 to become a theologian. There was the aristocratic, patriotic and astonishingly accomplished family crushed by the country they would have died to save. (The Bonhoeffer family lost four members to the Nazis.) There was the consummate intellectual who, safely ensconced in New York City at the start of World War II, returned almost immediately to Germany because, as he put it, if he did not suffer his country's destruction, then he could not credibly participate in her restoration.

By that point Bonhoeffer was already well-known, and not simply in Germany. He had written what still may be his most famous book, "The Cost of Discipleship" (1937), which is both bracing and haunting to read in light of the events that followed. ("Just as Christ is Christ only in virtue of his



bpk, Berlin/Art Resource, NY

suffering and rejection, so the disciple is a disciple only insofar as he shares his Lord's suffering and rejection and crucifixion.") Faith, Bonhoeffer stressed, could be found only in *actions* of faith: "Only he who obeys, believes."

Just about the entire German church, Catholics and Protestants, turned up its belly to Hitler—and was gutted. Bonhoeffer was undecieved from the start. Within two days of Hitler's ascension in 1933, with storm troopers already in the streets, Bonhoeffer gave a dangerous radio address in which he proclaimed resistance to the Reich and support for the Jews. His sense of Christian responsibility and fraternity would only grow firmer. "Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing the Gregorian chant," he said in 1938.

Eventually this gentle, cerebral man became a quite capable double agent, ostensibly working for German military intelligence while he was actually passing information to the nations at war with

Germany, as well as helping Jews escape. The pacifist so adamant that at one time he believed all violence was demonic joined a group that launched multiple assassination attempts on the life of Hitler. "Both the no and the yes involve guilt," Bonhoeffer told one of his anguished co-conspirators. The only consolation lay in knowing that the guilt was "always borne by Christ."

And Christ—the immediacy of him in other men's faces, the suffering that was both shearing and shared—was what Bonhoeffer clung to when the Gestapo arrested him in April 1943. For a time his circumstances, aside from the extreme isolation, were relatively mild because of his family connections and because the full extent of his "betrayal" was not known. Writings of all sorts—letters, fragments, sermons, poetry—poured out of him.

A different side of Bonhoeffer's theology emerged in prison: "The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God." His family would eventually find these writings, which gained an enormous readership after Bonhoeffer's death, a great consolation. Not only did they reveal his strength of character and existential serenity even as things grew truly awful—Bonhoeffer suffered degrading, painful torture and was finally executed in April 1945—but they ameliorated some of Bonhoeffer's early sternness. They also restored the more mystical side of Bonhoeffer that had made him become a theologian in the first place.

Charles Marsh's excellent biography, "Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," enters a crowded and contentious field. For years the standard life, and certainly the most theologically comprehensive, has been the book written by Bonhoeffer's closest friend, Eberhard Bethge,

"Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary." But it is almost 50 years old, it's a thousand pages long and of course Bethge had no access to any of the information that has been unearthed in the intervening years.

More recently, Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, founder of the Bonhoeffer Society and a close friend of Bethge, published "Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance" in 2010. Unfortunately for Mr. Schlingensiepen, his scrupulous and erudite book appeared at almost exactly the same time as Eric Metaxas's blockbuster, "Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy" (notice how the descriptors are amped up for a broader audience). Mr. Metaxas sought to "reclaim" Bonhoeffer, both from a certain strand of liberal Protestantism that reads most attentively from the existential, *in extremis* late work (my favorite part of Bonhoeffer, I should admit) and from the secular humanists who had, in Mr. Metaxas's view, sought to praise Bonhoeffer's courage while purging his Christianity.

Mr. Marsh does not even mention the Metaxas book or the enormous attention it brought to Bonhoeffer. He is a scholar, and Mr. Metaxas is a popular biographer, and it's possible that Mr. Marsh found no new information in the Metaxas book that he needed for "Strange Glory." Still, though Mr. Marsh deals quite well with the intractable contradictions of Bonhoeffer's beliefs and actions, he misses the chance to situate the theologian and his ideas more clearly within the contemporary context. A simple preface would have helped.

But he goes about his business quietly and professionally (the notes alone are a treasure of information), and he has a rare talent for novelistic detail—which requires a genuine creative imagination as well as scrupulously documented research in order not to become ridiculous. It's lovely to read of young Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, lying awake at night "trying to imagine eternity":

When the twins got separate bedrooms they devised a code for keeping up their metaphysical games. Dietrich would drum lightly on the wall with his fingers, an "admonitory knock" announcing that it was time once again to ponder eternity. A further tap signaled a new reflection on the solemn theme, and so it went, back and forth, until one of them discerned the final silence—usually it was Dietrich. And with the game concluded, he lay awake, the only light in his room coming from a pair of candle-lit crosses his mother had placed atop a corner table.

It's inspiring to almost feel Bonhoeffer slipping verses or notes of comfort into the sweaty hands of fellow prisoners either coming or going from torture. Mr. Marsh is so good at these scenes, so deeply embedded within them, that you almost miss when the bombshell drops.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was gay.

Well, no, that's not what Mr. Marsh says, not outright. What he says is that for a number of years Bonhoeffer and Bethge, who had been teacher and student, lived very much like a couple: sharing a bank account, giving gifts under both of their names, traveling together, sleeping by warm fires, and rapturously reading books and playing the piano madly at all hours. Their intimacy was that of lovers, not friends.

There is no question of consummation, nor even the suggestion that Bonhoeffer ever actively sought it. "Bonhoeffer's relationship with Bethge had always strained toward the achievement of a romantic love," writes Mr. Marsh, "one ever chaste but complete in its complex aspirations."

But what about Bonhoeffer's engagement, at the age of 36, to Maria von Wedemeyer, who was 20 years his junior and the first "girlfriend" he'd ever had? Mr. Marsh stresses not only that last fact but also the severe formality between them and their intellectual incompatibility (he had been her teacher—and flunked her!). Bonhoeffer made his proposal just two weeks after Bethge made his own (to Bonhoeffer's 17-year-old niece) and, according to Mr. Marsh, "took it as a test of his own mettle—his capacity for entering into and sustaining a romance with a woman and thus keeping pace, as it were, with the man who was his soul mate."

On one level, it's hard for me to care about any of this. It is possible for a man to fall in love with another man and not be gay. It is possible for a woman to fall in love with another woman and not be a lesbian. Or perhaps in both instances the lovers do warrant the words but in some more elastic and empathetic versions than contemporary American culture—or at least conservative religious culture—seems inclined to allow. Human desire is a complex phenomenon. Just think how much more complex is the human desire for God, or God's desire for what human love ought to look like.

Still, there's another way of looking at this. Theology is not a discipline like science, sociology or even philosophy. You can't draw some stark line between the life and work of the theologian, because in a very real sense the life is an active test of the work. When Martin Luther wrote, late in his life, that the Jews are a "base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and . . . must be accounted as filth," and then went on to suggest that the only Christian thing to do to Jews might be to kill them, the comments not only anticipated and almost ordained the rise of Nazism but also seeped like sewage back through the rest of Luther's truly beautiful work, which can now never have quite the same smell.

And Bonhoeffer? He "became a theologian because he was lonely," wrote Bethge, who would have known best. That loneliness is woven into the early, Wordsworthian experiences with nature that Bonhoeffer claimed—in a letter from a Gestapo prison—"made me who I am." It is evident in the conflicted way in which he approached divinity: the awful longing for an absent God, the hunger for the hot touch of an absolute Christ. And one sees it most acutely in the way he pursued an always deeper intimacy with Bethge, who clearly determined the limits of their relationship, finally declaring in a letter that he simply could not give Bonhoeffer the kind of companionship he wanted.

There will be blood among American evangelicals over Mr. Marsh's claim. For some, it will be more damning to Bonhoeffer's memory than any anti-Semitic aside that Martin Luther made half a millennium ago. I suspect that's precisely why Mr. Marsh has written his book with such subtlety and circumspection: He didn't want this story to be *the* story. He may be in for quite a shock.

As for myself, I feel both grateful for and pained by the revelation. Mr. Marsh's evidence does seem compelling—though I think he may underestimate the feelings Bonhoeffer developed for his fiancée. I am grateful because the research casts a different, more introspective light on some of

Bonhoeffer's ideas and inclinations (his extreme need for a community that was bound together both physically and spiritually, for example). I am pained for the same reason: The discovery reveals the rift of emptiness, of unanswered longing, that ran right through Bonhoeffer and every word he wrote.

But this is precisely the quality that makes Bonhoeffer so essential to believers now. He embodies—and refuses to neutralize—the contradictions that have haunted and halved Christianity for well over a century. The same man who once declared that the church was the only possible answer to human loneliness also suspected that we were entering a stage in which "Christianity will only live in a few people who have nothing to say." The same man who once called marriage "God's holy ordinance, through which He wills to perpetuate the human race till the end of time" was almost certainly in love with another man—right up to his dying day.

This is where Charles Marsh's book becomes truly beautiful and heartbreaking. Though by all accounts Bonhoeffer projected great strength and cheer even in the direst conditions, "fears of oblivion were a different matter," Mr. Marsh writes; "the worst times were those when the past felt lost forever. 'I want my life,' he had whispered [in a poem] in the dark in the summer of 1944. 'I demand my own life back. My past. You!' "

It takes a moment to realize just how poignant and surprising this longing is. Fear, when you are close to death, can be as much about memory as mortality. The fear is that all the life that has meant so much to you, the life that seemed threaded with gleams of God, in fact meant nothing, is unrecoverable and already part of the oblivion you feel yourself slipping into. Faith, when you are close to death, is a matter of receiving the grace of God's presence, of yielding to an abiding instinct for that atomic and interstellar unity that even the least perception, in even the worst circumstances, can imply. "Lord, that I am a moment of your turnings," as the contemporary poet Julia Randall wrote.

"Strange Glory" is a splendid book. It counters the neutered humanism extracted from Bonhoeffer by secularists who do not want to admit that his bravery and his belief might have been inextricable. It is honest to Bonhoeffer's orthodoxies, which were strict, and distinguishes him from the watery—and thus waning—liberal Protestantism that has emerged since the 1960s. And, best of all, Mr. Marsh very properly emphasizes the importance of the volatile, visionary thoughts in the last letters and fragments, which Bonhoeffer himself believed might be his best work.

The multiple Bonhoeffers offered up by competing camps are a chimera. There is only the one man, who was aimed, finally, in one direction. As Charles Marsh (channeling Bonhoeffer) says so eloquently at the very end of his book: "The word of God does not ally itself with the rebellion of mistrust, but reigns in the strangest of glories."

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