

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa: Shaping the Church's Response to the Challenges of Our Day

by Paul Wee



### I. The Thesis

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa have willed to succeeding generations a powerful legacy of faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. They have provided articulate leadership for the church under conditions of hostility and oppression. Finding freedom in the confidence of God's ultimate victory, they were willing to sacrifice their own lives for others. Although their resistance took different forms – active participation in the resistance movement for Bonhoeffer; self-giving, non-violent sacrifice for Gudina – they were united in maintaining a fundamental conviction: Discipleship to Christ entails resistance to the powers of darkness, whether in the state or the church. One of the primary forces that molded the life and thought of the Ethiopian church leader was the life and thought of the German theologian, such that one might say that Gudina Tumsa was the Bonhoeffer of Ethiopia. Just as the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains a source of inspiration to the church today, so also does the witness of Gudina Tumsa continue to inspire and guide the church as it faces new challenges. Two challenges, or crises, in particular, confront the church in our day: How might the Bonhoeffer-Gudina legacy help in shaping the church's response to a) the crisis of global community, the loss of a commitment to a sharing of the world's

wealth in the face of globalization, and b) the crisis of faith, he loss of a commitment to Christ as the center of life amid forces of disintegration?

## **II. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa: An Overview**

Why is it that the lives of these two pastors of the church have been increasingly<sup>1</sup> linked together? Invariably, accounts of the life of Gudina Tumsa and the history of the EECMY devote at least a line or a paragraph to his relationship to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The differences between these men stand out prominently.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1904, twenty-five years before Gudina Tumsa. Bonhoeffer was raised in a well-to-do bourgeois family of educators and doctors, in Breslau and Berlin; Gudina Tumsa was born in the Ethiopian town of Bodji in what is now Western Wollega, the son of poor farmers.
- Bonhoeffer was educated in the classical tradition of Western philosophy at the gymnasium in Breslau and the Universities of Tübingen and Berlin. Tumsa went to school in his village before going off to study at the Swedish Mission School in Nedjo. He was admitted to Luther Theological Seminary in

<sup>1</sup> Eide, Øyvind, **Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia**. 2000, p. 177. Perhaps first to make the link between Bonhoeffer and Gudina was Christian Krause. Following his recollection of his last conversation with Gudina, Krause states "Guddinaa Tumsaa drew all his motivation from Scripture. In my opinion he is comparable to Bonhoeffer". See also Tasgara Hirpo's address to the Global Missiological Seminar of 2001, "Rev. Gudina Tumsa's Contribution to the Understanding of a National Church". Tasgara writes (p. 96) that Gudina "rightly compared with Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Germany, who boldly opposed the ideology of Hitler and spoke publicly against it."

St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, without the formal academic prerequisites.

- Where Gudina Tumsa and Tsehay Tolessa were parents to five children, Bonhoeffer, though engaged to Maria Wedemeyer, was, because of imprisonment and death, never able to marry and have children.
- Gudina was an evangelist and practical theologian of the church who went on to hold leadership positions in the church; Bonhoeffer was an academic theologian in the German classical tradition and never held office in the hierarchy of the church.
- Where Gudina was embroiled in the issues relating to the evangelization of non-Christians, relationships to mission societies from abroad, issues of moratorium and church order, Bonhoeffer was never faced with such questions.
- Where Bonhoeffer became a member of the military intelligence (Abwehr) and actively worked with members of the military who were part of the resistance movement, Gudina never left his position within the church,
- Where Bonhoeffer made the choice for active resistance to the Third Reich, Gudina took the path of non-violent opposition and patient suffering.

We are speaking, therefore, at least *prima facie*, of two very different individuals who lived at different times and in very different historical and geographical contexts. *What was it that bound them - and continues to bind them - together*, such that Gudina Tumsa is often referred to as Ethiopia's Bonhoeffer?

- The lives of both men were characterized by a deep, personal faith in Jesus Christ; both were committed to the discipline of daily Bible reading, prayer, study and meditation.
- Both were known for maintaining integrity between what they said and what they did, between what they as Christians represented and who they were as individual people; this rare integrity was part of their faithful witness until the end of their lives.
- Both rejected the notion that the Christian faith belonged to one area of human activity alongside other areas; Christ was the center of life, the dimension of depth and meaning within every discipline and within every human activity; neither was able to divorce the spiritual from the material, the secular from the sacred.
- Through their studies and experiences in the US, both Bonhoeffer and Gudina, were brought face to face with the burning issues of racial discrimination and economic and political injustice; at the same time, both were exposed to the theological resources and the people, those within and those outside the church, that were actively addressing those issues.
- Both understood that there is a political dimension inherent in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, that it is directed not only to the personal lives of individuals, but also to the structures and practices of the social, economic and political life of the community.
- Both understood that, in addition to the forces of the state that sought to undermine or compromise the mission of the church, there were also forces within the church that were doing the same; these needed to be confronted.

- Although both Bonhoeffer and Gudina realized that citizens of their own countries needed to stand in the front lines of the struggle against demonic powers within their respective governments, they also sought to enlist the support of international friends and partners.
- Both were given opportunities to avoid the immense personal dangers that threatened them in their own countries; both were encouraged to leave for safe havens abroad before it was too late. Knowing the risks, both chose to remain with their people.
- Both Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa, in their own ways, protested the violations of human rights and dignity that were being carried out on a massive scale in their respective countries. Both, because of their opposition, were executed by the security arms of their own governments.
- Both have left a legacy of discipleship, its costs and its joys, that will continue to be an inspiration to people within the ecumenical church as well as to people outside the church who value human dignity, integrity and courage.

### **III. Bonhoeffer and Gudina: A Personal Reflection**

#### **A. The Role of the Church in Society**

It is important to document the nature of my own relationship with Gudina and how it came that we spoke together on more than one occasion about the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Early thirty years ago this week, I had the privilege of being with Gudina Tumsa at a conference. It was the first week in May, 1973; the place was Santiago, Chile; the occasion was on LWF Studies

consultation on the church and socialism. This was to be one of the most important consultations for my own thinking about the relationship of faith in Jesus Christ to the questions about the quality of life in a global society, and I will forever be grateful to the Department of Studies of the LWF, especially to Ulrich Duchrow and Gerd Decke, for making the experience possible.

I had come to the conference from Berlin where I was Senior Representative of the LWF, with responsibility for maintaining ties with the LWF member churches in East Germany, known then as the German Democratic Republic (GDR). My work included overseeing a program of support for the GDR churches as well as the arranging of conferences dealing with a variety of themes relating to the role of a Christian in society. It could be said that I was preoccupied with the same question that Gudina Tumsa was asking throughout his life: How does the message of the church relate to social, economic and political systems? How, in particular, should the message of the church interact with capitalist, socialist (especially Marxist) systems of governance?

### **B. The Church and Socialism: Latin America**

The conference took place in Latin America where a social revolution was in full swing. It was being stirred to vigorous debate and action, not only by students, teachers, journalists and community leaders, but by a new breed of post-Vatican II Roman Catholic clergy and lay leaders who understood sin not only as something evil in the heart of the individual, but also as the demonic within oppressive political, economic and military systems. To many of these leaders, Marxism offered not so much a blueprint for social revolution as it did a vision for a more equitable distribution of both decision-making power and the wealth of the earth.

This conference was a mixture of Bible study, theological discussion and face-to-face encounter with people that were, at that very moment, engulfed in forces that were creating profound social change. On the one hand, the conference brought us into a context characterized by exhilarating hope on the part of poor communities that looked to the church to help liberate them from the squalid conditions of the inner-city barrio or the life of virtual servitude – long hours, bad pay, little health care, no security for old age – on the larger farms. On the other hand, we were exposed to communities of wealth and power who lived in fear that their centuries old life of privilege and comfort might be coming to an end. The year 1973 was the year in Chile in which these two forces clashed as the government of Salvador Allende Gossens, who had been recently (1970) elected, was to be shaken to its core. The Marxist-leaning Allende was praised by the poor for creating conditions that allowed wealth to be shared; at the same time he was condemned by the wealthy for undermining their long-standing economic privileges.

The Chilean experience was followed by an equally devastating experience in Argentina during the second part of the LWF consultation on the church and socialism. Our group of participants was brought face to face with the reality of hunger in the villages and in the barrios around Buenos Aires, just as the infamous "Dirty War," waged by the government and military against the socialist Left, was getting under way. I would return to the US and Berlin shaken by the experience. Of special interest for me was the conflict between socialism and capitalism as this was being played out on the world stage by the Soviet Union and the United States.

Several months prior to the conference in Chile and Argentina I had spoken to Gudina about its subject matter: The church and socialism. Following the experience in Latin America, I would speak to Gudina again. This time, however, there was a greater sense of urgency to these conversations. From the beginning, the concerns that Gudina

and I shared were not merely academic; they were integral to our involvement in the social revolution taking place, not only in Europe and Africa, but in Latin America as well. It was clear that we were wrestling in principle with the same issues, albeit from perspectives that arose out of differing social conditions. For me it was the convulsive social situation in Latin America, and the role of my own country, the United States, that was to provide the critical element in this discussion. For Gudina, it was the rise of a Marxist government in Ethiopia.

Our primary question revolved around the church's proper role amid the changes that were taking place. It was the height of the Cold War and the conflict, in general terms, was that between the forces of democratic capitalism and those of Marxist-oriented socialism. Although this conflict had its primary origin in Europe, its flash-point being the Wall in Berlin, it belonged to a drama that was being played out around the world, from Namibia and South Africa to Nicaragua and El Salvador, from Ethiopia to Chile.

### C. The Church and Socialism: Ethiopia

Mention of the LWF conference in Chile and Argentina is important for the present discussion for a number of reasons, in the first place, it exposed me to some of the harsh realities that Gudina Tumsa would be experiencing more directly and with much greater intensity. It was the experience in Latin America that brought both a deeper insight into the nature of social revolutions, whether of the Right or the Left. It also created a sense of urgency to pursue the issue in which both Gudina and I had been engaged, namely the appropriate role for the church in society. In the second place, it was my experience in Latin America that occasioned the more intensive conversations with Gudina about the resources that might be able to offer answers to a number of these questions. Among these resources was the

the theological work of the German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The issues that were shaking the foundations of the social order in Ethiopia were basically the same as those creating unrest in many countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Given its theological commitment to free market capitalism, as well as the fact that it related to most of these countries economically and politically, the United States was also – as the example of Chile attests - deeply involved in the unrest. In its study, **Christians and the Many Faces of Marxism**, Lutheran World Ministries, which served as the National Committee of the LWF in the United States, engaged theologians in the United States to reflect on the historical and contemporary significance of Marxist teaching and practice. As general secretary of Lutheran World Ministries, I made reference to the Ethiopian situation in the Foreword to that volume:

In Ethiopia, on the eve of the revolution which he favored but which finally turned against him, Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, made an urgent request, "Please send us books dealing with Marxism and Christianity. We are not prepared for what is coming."<sup>2</sup>

There is any one topic of conversation between Gudina and me that stands out as particularly meaningful, it was this one on Christianity and Marxism. Yet he was not only interested in how others might provide assistance to the EECMY; he was equally concerned to direct hard questions at the institutions of the North-Atlantic countries generally, and the United States in particular. In what ways, he asked,

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<sup>2</sup>Same, Wayne, ed., **Christians and the Many Faces of Marxism**. 1984, p. 12

has your country contributed to the poverty and lack of development in countries of the South?<sup>3</sup>

Gudina's primary concern, at least initially, was to discover the ways in which the Christian faith might interact constructively with the ideology of the revolution that was taking shape on Ethiopia's horizon. From the biblical prophets he easily found justification for speaking out against economic and political exploitation and the violation of human dignity. He had little good to say about the stratified society kept in place under the feudalism perpetuated by Haile Selassie I. He let it be known that the church would tolerate no claims to supremacy on the part of any ethnic group or any church in Ethiopia. As to the outcome of Scientific Socialism, he would have to wait and see. But the principle remained solid and unchanged: The church would work with those in authority as long as they served the well-being of the Ethiopian people. At the same time, the church was obliged to speak out against all forms of injustice and discrimination, regardless of the source, whether these were expressed in the ideological, political or economic system – or in the teachings or practices of the church.

#### **IV. Bonhoeffer and Gudina: The Role of the Church in Society**

##### **A. Their Theological Stance**

In responding to these issues, a major theological resource and personal inspiration was provided Gudina by the German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He had become acquainted with Bonhoeffer's writings during his days at Luther Seminary in the USA.

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<sup>3</sup> It was this stance, though offensive to some, that earned Gudina Tumsa so much respect among church, mission and agency leaders.

in the mid-1960s.<sup>4</sup> Gudina was, I believe, drawn to Bonhoeffer for two main reasons; first, because the German theologian was radically Christ-centered, without at the same time finding it necessary to abandon life in the world; secondly, because Bonhoeffer's experience with Nazism during the Third Reich was akin to the Ethiopian experience during the period of Italian fascism in the late 1930s.

For Gudina, Bonhoeffer represented a viable way to be a pious, God-fearing, evangelical Christian – in the manner of his upbringing at home and in the mission schools – and also be capable of addressing the complex realities of the social world. Bonhoeffer was compelling for Tumsa because Bonhoeffer had been able to overcome the dichotomy in much of Western thinking, not only between the spiritual and the material, but between what one believed and who one actually was as a person.

This belief in the given, fundamental unity of life, a unity in which all aspects of one's being adhered, without contradiction, is thoroughly African. Bonhoeffer acknowledged his debt to Africa<sup>5</sup> for this insight – to an understanding of the being of things which, he also discovered, was very Hebraic, that is, very biblical. Bonhoeffer sought – with no small difficulty – to demonstrate the reality and validity of this holistic thinking to a Western world laboring under the weight of Enlightenment rationalism and a new empiricism that reduced knowledge to that which was verifiable by the senses.

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<sup>4</sup> Tasgara Hirpo claims that "Gudina came in contact with the theology of Bonhoeffer during his stay at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, USA." (GTF, *Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa*, Missiological Seminar, 2001, Report Volume and Lectures, p.96. This is Vol 2 in the series: GUDINA TUMSA AND HIS LEGACY.)

<sup>5</sup> During Bonhoeffer's one trip to Africa, to Tripoli, Libya, in 1924, he wrote primarily about the holistic sense of life expressed in the Islamic-African culture, in which "everyday life and religion are not kept separate as they are in the whole of the Church" (Bethge, p. 38).

Nor did this holistic understanding of the nature of being have relevance only for the theology of the church and the policies of mission and development agencies. In the face of pressure by hostile governments that sought to either co-opt or marginalize the churches, pushing them into a "spiritual" ghetto that would render them harmless, such a holistic understanding had a profoundly political meaning: It stated unequivocally that the church was committed to the whole person in community. Let governments be put on notice: The church is going to be actively involved in the political, economic and social life of the nation.

### **B. The Church in a Totalitarian State**

What form should the church take within a Marxist state, that is in a state that not only envisions the day when the church ceases to exist, its (capitalist) economic substructure having been removed, but a state that encourages the coming of that day as well? Since the social model imposed on Ethiopia by the Soviet Union and its surrogates was similar to that imposed on the countries of the Eastern European socialist bloc, including the GDR, it might be helpful to take a closer look at the GDR model. And since the role of the church in the GDR owed a debt to Bonhoeffer, it would be helpful to understand how the church sought to define its role.

The Bishop who served as head of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR, Albrecht Schoenherr, was a young friend and student of Bonhoeffer's at the illegal seminary of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde.<sup>6</sup> As the major leader of the church in the communist East, Schoenherr knew, as did his teacher, that the prophetic word of the church needed to be spoken on two fronts, against the violation of human rights perpetrated by the state and,

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<sup>6</sup> Finkenwalde, near Stettin on the Baltic coast, was one of the "preachers' seminaries" of the Confessing Church. Led by Bonhoeffer, it was closed by the Gestapo in September of 1937.

secondly, against those groups within the church that had lost their integrity by providing a quasi-religious blessing on state policy.

Within the church in East Germany, as in the Ethiopian church, one could identify four basic groups.<sup>7</sup> which might be named as follows: 1. the Quietists, Christians who wanted no involvement of any kind in the affairs of society; 2. the Fellow Travelers (Mitläufer) who simply approved and supported the state's agenda without criticism; 3. the Critical Solidarity group, those willing to express solidarity with some of the state's goals, but who also reserved the right to voice critical opposition when this was called for; and 4. the Resistors, Christians who saw their role as one of opposition, whether passive or violent, to the state. It would be helpful to consider these four groups from the very similar positions of Bonhoeffer and Tumsa.

### *1. Quietism*

For Gudina, as for Bonhoeffer, the style of the quietists was not an option. A Christian who retreated from active social involvement into the isolation of a privatized faith was really no Christian at all. In his well-known treatise, "Thinking in Terms of Two Spheres," in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer launches a major attack on the heresy of thinking in terms of "two spheres" ("the one divine, holy, supernatural and Christian, and the other worldly, profane, natural and un-Christian"<sup>8</sup>) Bonhoeffer, writes that

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<sup>7</sup> This scheme for describing the church in the GDR was developed by Ralph Zorn, a Lutheran pastor from the US serving in the West Berlin church. In his address, "The Role of Gudina Tumsa in a Critical Dialogue between Marxism/Socialism and Christianity," at Gudina Tumsa Foundation's Missiological Seminar in Makanissa, Ethiopia, April 18-21, 2001, Gerd Decke develops a similar four-group scheme to describe the situation of the church in Ethiopia during the 1970s. See GTF: Life and Ministry, Report Volume and Lectures, pp. 116ff.

<sup>8</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 63

there is no real possibility of being a Christian outside the reality of the world and...there is no real worldly existence outside the reality of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Here Bonhoeffer goes well beyond what is usually meant by "Christ-centered," however. The term does not mean simply that devotion to Christ is one's ultimate concern, to use Paul Tillich's phrase; it means that Christ belongs to the universal structure of reality itself. There is, to use Eberhard Bethge's expression, an "ontological coherence" between Christ and the world, according to Bonhoeffer:

Whoever sees Jesus Christ does indeed see God and world in one. He can no longer see God without the world or the world without God.<sup>10</sup>

Thus reality itself has a Christocentric character; it is the form that Christ takes in the world. The question of Christian ethics in Bonhoeffer, according to Larry Rasmussen, moves from the indicative to the imperative, from a question about what is in fact the case to a question about the type of behavior that is required, from "How is Christ taking form among people here and now?" to "What action on my part conforms to this reality?"<sup>11</sup>

For Gudina, the claim that

a Christian lives in a given society where he carries out the mandate given to him by the Lord of the Church,<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 70

<sup>11</sup> Rasmussen, Larry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance. 1972, p. 89

<sup>12</sup> Gudina, "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society," para. 1, Document 1 in: *Witness and Discipleship, the Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa* (Vol. 1 in the GTF series: GUDINA TUMSA AND HIS LEGACY)

as for Bonhoeffer, rooted in the conviction that Christ, as the Word made flesh, is at the heart of all life. In this connection it should be noted that the historic letter of the ECMY, "On the Interrelation between the Proclamation of the Gospel and Human Development," was not simply a request to donor agencies to consider an alteration in their criteria for providing aid; it was, at a more profound level, a call for reconsideration of the biblical (and African) understanding of the holistic nature of the human being in community. To make an artificial separation of the soul from the body, the spiritual from the material, would lead to, and provide justification for a disastrous separation of the life of the church from the life of the world.

## 2 Fellow Travelers

With respect to the group of Christians who were simply "rubber stamps" of state policy, these were, in Bonhoeffer's view, clearly the "German Christians", the vast majority who supported the policies of the Third Reich. They had, in the view of Bonhoeffer, effectively sold their birthright in the kingdom of God for the privileges that come with supporting the imperial and racist policies of the state. The "German Christians" were highly organized throughout the country, developed their own oaths of loyalty to the Fuehrer, baptized and married under the sign of the swastika and proclaimed German nationalism as the way of salvation for the world.

The lines of battle between this nationalized church and the church that sought to be faithful to the gospel were drawn in 1934 when the Barmen Declaration was signed, signaling the beginning of the German Church Struggle, the Kirchenkampf (see section V below).

The extent to which there were "fellow travelers" in the EECMY, others will have to document. The Amharic-dominated Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which viewed itself as the bearer of

Ethiopian nationalism, was clearly under greater pressure to provide endorsement of state ideology. Tasgara Hirpo goes so far as to say, "The Orthodox Church and the government were one and the same."<sup>13</sup> Although there are notable cases of EOC leaders who were executed for expressing critical views and for resisting state policies, the majority appeared ready to endorse the new order without criticism.

Among members of the EECMY there was also great pressure to go along with the ideology of Scientific Socialism, especially in the face of the Red Terror of 1977-78 and the murder of its General Secretary, Gudina Tumsa in 1979. The government's campaign of forced resettlement and villagization was carried out for purposes of ideological control. The food distribution program had to continually struggle against forces that sought to use it as a weapon of coercion.<sup>14</sup>

One thing appears clear: Both Bonhoeffer and Tumsa were killed precisely because they refused to be fellow-travelers with those who espoused an ideology that stood in direct contradiction to the gospel of Christ.

### *3. Critical Solidarity*

This is an expression that grew out of the situation of the churches in the GDR. It referred to pastors and lay leaders who adopted what might be termed a "dialectical" (yes and no) approach to the state and its ideology. It said in effect "yes" to some things, e.g. the goals for social justice, peace and equality based on socialism, but "no" to

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<sup>13</sup> Life and Ministry Missiological Seminar 2001, Report Volume and Lectures, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> See the excellent documentation of the ecumenical famine relief program of 1984-85: Richard Solberg, *Miracle in Ethiopia: a partnership response to famine*, 1991.

other things, e.g. the demand that everyone think in orthodox Marxist-Leninist terms, or the practice of jailing political dissidents.

Generally speaking, the governments of the Socialist bloc in Europe, as well as the regimes in Ethiopia and Cuba, did not take kindly to this "critical solidarity" group. Solidarity with the state was fine; criticism would not be tolerated.

In contrast to the period of the Third Reich, this "critical solidarity" group in the GDR constituted, not the minority, but the majority of Christians. It was this group in the GDR that in fact helped create the conditions that brought about the peaceful revolution of 1989 that brought an end to communist rule in East Germany.

As the papers from the Gudina Tumsa Foundation's Missiological Seminar of 2001 testify, Gudina was definitely in the critical solidarity group, especially in the early days of the revolution. His was a dialectical approach, affirming those things that were in the interests of the Ethiopian people, but expressing criticism of those things that were not. He was quite willing to express his views to leaders in the Mengistu government, but as a pastor he certainly would not have found it possible to accept a position in the government itself. The fundamental question for Gudina as leader of his church was this: To what extent could one support the aspirations and policies of Mengistu? At what point would the church, because of its faithfulness to its Lord, need to move from critical support to one of opposition?

The tension between the "critical solidarity" and "resistance" options, as both Bonhoeffer and Gudina, became more severe as the government's policies became more ruthless. As more people were "disappeared", abused or killed, it became increasingly clear that any type of "solidarity" with state ideology or policy would be out of the question.

#### 4. Resistance

With respect to those Christians who understood their role in terms of violent resistance to the political authorities, Gudina was clear that this could never be the normative course of action for the church. The church needs to work with the government in helping others, as the ecumenical food distribution program of the mid 1980s demonstrated. Only when the government becomes unredeemable, assuming for itself the unconditional and absolute sovereignty reserved alone for God, does Gudina open the door to resistance. Speaking of the Christian, Gudina says:

The only limitation to his cooperation or obedience to the laws of his country is if he is commanded to act contrary to the law of God (Acts 5:29)<sup>15</sup> ["We must obey God rather than men. "]

Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, having adopted this position after intense conversations with the French student at Union Theological Seminar, Jean Lasserre, himself a pacifist. Yet in the face of the gross violations of human rights perpetrated by the Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer opened the door for an exception. In the late 1930s he departed from his earlier pacifism and stated that, though in normal times a Christian is called to respect the laws of the country, there are exceptional times (*Grenzrfälle*) when obedience to Christ means that the law must be superseded. In a conversation with Italian prisoner, Gaetano Latmiral, in Tegel Prison (Berlin), Bonhoeffer provides his justification for taking part in the conspiracy. As Latmiral relates it, Bonhoeffer said that he as a pastor did not only have the duty to console the victims of a mad man who drove a speeding car down a crowded street, but that he might also try to stop him.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Gudina Tumsa, "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society" III 11-12, b

<sup>16</sup> Reist, Benjamin, *The Promise of Bonhoeffer*. p. 42

The question of the Christian's duty to resist is critical in both Bonhoeffer and Gudina.

## V. From Confession to Resistance

### A. Bonhoeffer

In *The Cost of Discipleship*,<sup>17</sup> his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer calls for "single-minded obedience to the commands of Jesus". This was not an "interim ethic" or one that applied only to the disciples. This was for all Christians without exception. Because the world is evil, "the precept of non-resistance must be put into practice."<sup>18</sup> During his time in Tegel prison in Berlin, however, Bonhoeffer's approach to the ethical basis of the Christian life began to undergo a significant change. As conditions began to deteriorate in Germany, and as the extermination of Jews became systematic, Bonhoeffer began to see pacifism as an illegitimate escape from responsibility. Speaking of *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, "Today I can see the dangers of this book, though I am prepared to stand by what I wrote."<sup>19</sup> He began to speak less about loyalty to the state as God's servant and to speak more about the Christian's primary loyalty to Jesus Christ. He began to speak about the freedom of the Christian to break the law for the sake of obedience to Christ. There are times when a follower of Christ, acting in responsibility for the sake of others, must be prepared to assume guilt and simply act decisively, even if this means breaking the laws of the state and the laws of God.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship* SCM Press, 1959 (First published in 1937 as *Nachfolge* (or simply "discipleship"))

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 129

<sup>19</sup> *Letters and Papers from Prison*, the Macmillan Company, 1953, p. 226  
Bonhoeffer wrote this letter on July 21, 1944, the day following the unsuccessful attempt to take Hitler's life.)

This was a momentous change in the thinking of Bonhoeffer. It meant that, for a Christian, neither the laws of the state nor the commandments of the Holy Scripture (e.g. "Thou shalt not kill") had absolute status.<sup>20</sup>

Although stated very briefly, it was this change in thinking on Christian ethics that led Bonhoeffer to become part of the resistance movement and eventually to be implicated in the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

### **B. Gudina Tumsa**

In the last weeks of his life, Tumsa wrote down what has frequently been called his "last will and testament." Entitled, "The Role of a Christian in a Given Society," it sets out the principles that are to guide the life of a Christian, in particular, one who lives in a hostile environment. It is an eloquent statement of the meaning of faith, an Ethiopian "Barmen Declaration". It moves smoothly from the dynamics of redemption through the liberating grace of God in Christ to the demands of discipleship amid the hard realities of life under totalitarian government. Quoting St. Paul's admonition to the church in Romans 12:1,2, Gudina appeals to his own people, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

He then turns to the relationship of the Christian to the state, laying out the classic Lutheran interpretation that calls for obedience to the state (obeying laws, paying taxes, etc.) unless the state demands

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<sup>20</sup> One notes a similar, but far less dramatic transition in Tumsa's thinking, as the situation in Ethiopia began to deteriorate further. Close colleagues and friends in the EECMY will be able to provide more information on this critical issue.

something that is clearly against the law of God. In Ethiopia this meant that a Christian is called upon to:

cooperate with governmental as well as other organizations, such as Rural and Urban Associations, in working for the well-being of the Ethiopian people. Everything possible should be done by the Christian in contributing to the current Green Revolution, so that hunger, one of the three enemies of developing countries, should be done away with [Gudina Tumsa the role of a Christian in a given society p. 7]

In essence the ultimate criterion for the action of a Christian in society is not whether such action conforms to the law, but whether it conforms to the form (Gestalt) of Christ in the world. The question to be asked is whether or not this action is in conformity to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The same principle holds with respect to one's obedience to the civil authorities. For both Bonhoeffer and Gudina, following Luther, there is one Lord over both church and state. Both church and state have separate functions, but both are accountable to the one Lord, In Ethics. Bonhoeffer writes:

Government and Church are bound by the same Lord and are bound together. In their task government and Church are separate, but government and Church have the same field of action, man.<sup>21</sup>

So what is the role of the Christian when the laws of the state contradict the law of God? For Bonhoeffer the answer was, in obedience to God, to act in freedom, but with responsibility for the sake of the other, even if this means breaking the laws of the civil

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<sup>21</sup> Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 315

(released on June 23). Fearing that a third arrest would certainly mean his death, he sat down and wrote this by hand. Days later, on July 28, 1979, following an evening worship service in the Urael Mekane Yesus Church in Addis Ababa, Gudina and his wife Tsahai Tolessa were picked up on the street by the government's security forces. Tsahai was released. Gudina was physically abused and summarily executed.

At the conclusion of his last major writing,<sup>26</sup> Gudina referred indirectly to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Undoubtedly he was speaking about himself and what he felt was coming.

As someone has said, when a person is called to follow Christ, that person is called to die. It means a redirection of the purpose of life, that is death to one's own wishes and personal desires and finding the greatest satisfaction in living for and serving the one who died for us and was raised from death. (2 Corinthians 5: 13-14)<sup>27</sup>

It is at this point that the life and witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa converge.

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.<sup>28</sup>

## VI. The Challenges Today

Two major crises face the church in our own day. They do exhibit some underlying dynamics that are similar to those faced by

<sup>26</sup> His very last public word was a sermon preached in the EECMY church in Ourael on Luke 14: 25ff, according to Eide, p. 178

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., para III a, p. 11

<sup>28</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, p. 79

Bonhoeffer and Tumsa. Allow me to speak from the perspective of my own situation as a citizen of the US.

### A. The Crisis of Global Community

#### I. *The Challenge*

We find ourselves at a dangerous time in human history. Following the end of the Cold War there was a measure of hope that the resources consumed by the East-West encounter might now be channeled into ways that serve global justice and authentic human development. This hope has proven to be illusory. Although there have been victories to report, for example, the successful struggle of the South African people against the injustices of the apartheid system, it must be concluded that the economic and political dynamics are not in place that might serve a greater distribution of the wealth of the planet. To the contrary, the much heralded "globalization of the economy" has only served to widen the gap between the wealthy and the poor of this world.

For its part the United States, which speaks of itself as "the only remaining superpower," has embarked on a unilateral course of global domination in the name of democracy, peace and capitalism.<sup>29</sup> In the face of the terrorist attack against the United States on September 11, 2001, the government of George W. Bush has responded, not only with military force against the Al Qaida network, but with the implementation of a new policy, known as the National Security Strategy, designed to employ military means to combat terrorism, to act against nations that possess weapons of mass destruction and to ensure access to global economic sources. The war

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<sup>29</sup> The official US position, known as the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, can be found on the following website: [www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/text/nssall.htm#i](http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/text/nssall.htm#i)

against Saddam Hussein's Iraq can best be understood as the first of a series of regional conflicts being carried out with this as a goal.

Without elaborating the National Security Strategy in detail, it is important to note that it is designed to establish those structures that will ensure the good of the global community through "freedom, democracy, and free enterprise."

These values...are right and true for every person, in every society and the duty of protecting these values against their enemies is the common calling of freedom-loving people across the globe and across the ages.<sup>30</sup>

Although the new strategy belongs to the post-Cold War national agenda, it is rooted deeply in the historic American vision to be a beacon of peace and justice for the entire world.

This is a time of opportunity for America. We will work to translate this moment of influence into decades of peace, prosperity, and liberty. The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the United States will abandon the policy of military deterrence, which may have been useful as a "reactive posture" during the Cold War period, but no longer applies when weapons of mass destruction can be delivered by "rogue states and terrorists."<sup>32</sup> Because "we cannot let our enemies strike first," the United States will therefore take "pre-emptive" action, that is, will not hesitate to strike first in pursuit of these goals.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 10

Finally it should be noted that, in the new strategy, free trade will be understood basically as a "moral principle," and secondarily as a principle of economic policy that is inherent in the "market-access" negotiations between the US and other countries of the world.

### *2 The Response*

It would be inappropriate to assume that simplistic comparisons can be made between the new National Security Strategy of the US and the ideology of either the National Socialism against which Dietrich Bonhoeffer fought from 1933 to 1945 or that of the Scientific Socialism that dominated Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991. The US is a representative democracy in which the freedoms of speech, assembly, press and religion are not only guaranteed in the Constitution but, to an extent unknown under either National Socialism or Scientific Socialism, expressed concretely in daily life.

Yet there is a point at which these and other national or trans-national ideologies converge, and that is in their claim to be able to interpret historical dynamics from the standpoint of a superior wisdom and virtue. Often the pretensions which underlie such claims, that is, the assumption that one is doing something worthy and noble, are hidden from the very leaders whose functioning is nonetheless based upon them. Thus a leader might be deluded into thinking that he is doing something for the good of humanity even as the very opposite of this supposed "good" is unfolding.

In retrospect, after 50 million people were killed, six million only because they were of Jewish faith and life, the arrogant pretensions to virtue in the case of National Socialism might not seem to have been "hidden" at all. But in the early years, when the country was climbing out of the depression and people were trying to overcome the humiliations of the Versailles treaty, the seeds were sown that would

not only help to overcome the guilt of the past, but would reaffirm a vibrant sense of national destiny.

Like most Germans at the time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer shared the desire to overcome any guilt from the past. In a sermon delivered in New York City during his first visit to the United States, Bonhoeffer, speaking of the First World War, wrote this:

Let me tell you frankly that no German and no stranger who knows well the history of the origin of the war believes that Germany bears the sole guilt of the war – a sentence which we were compelled to sign in the Treaty of Versailles<sup>33</sup>.

But then he turned to the tragic flaw that contributed to the mentality that led to war. The problem, he maintained, lay in the nation's arrogance,

in her belief in her almightyess, in the lack of humility and faith in God and the fear of God...When the war broke out the German people did not consider very much the question of guilt. We thought it to be our duty to stand for our country<sup>34</sup> and we believed, of course, in our essential guiltlessness.

Bonhoeffer discovered the same sense of arrogance in the US mentality. During the academic year 1930-31, when he was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, one of his best friends was an African-American, Frank Fisher. It was Fisher who provided Bonhoeffer with an understanding of the history of racial discrimination against Blacks in the US, including the ways in which some of the churches sought to justify White supremacy theologically. Together they attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church

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<sup>33</sup> Bethge, p. 199

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 199

in Harlem where Bonhoeffer was exposed to the growing resentment among African Americans that was, in years to come, to express itself in violent clashes with the authorities.

When he was a student at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Gudina was exposed to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the public protest by the Black population of the US against decades of discrimination, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was not only fascinated by what was happening on the streets of the cities in the mid-1960s; he was intensely interested in the biblical rationale for the involvement of King and the churches. No doubt he was thinking all the time about Ethiopia.

But how would Bonhoeffer and Gudina respond to the crisis in global community today? I would answer as follows: Just as they both employed the resources of the biblical witness in speaking out against ethnic and racial prejudice, the denial of human and civil rights and the exploitation of the poor in their own day, both would do the same in the face of the crisis in global community today. Just as both understood the crises in their own countries in terms of the larger biblical demand to realize God's justice throughout the whole inhabited world, so would both Bonhoeffer and Gudina not hesitate to address issues of injustice in any part of God's world today.

And just as both were quick to see the pretensions to wisdom and virtue within the ideological self-understanding of their respective countries, so would both be prepared to identify such pretensions today, whether they exist in their countries or in other countries of the world. This includes the United States.

I would conjecture that both Bonhoeffer and Gudina, were they present today, would be very suspicious of the claim of any one nation to have a right to dominate based on a special calling to bring democracy, peace and a free-market economy to the world. They

would both be critical of the Iraq war mentality of moral supremacy that pervades many levels of US society. They would both remind us again that, even if the great majority is supportive of such a mentality, we need not. In such a situation, both Bonhoeffer and Gudina would remind us again of the word from Peter and the apostles, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

## B. The Crisis of Faith

### *1. The Challenge*

The second challenge to the church today I have simply called "the crisis of faith." Again, I speak as a Christian from the US and acknowledge the fact that, to a large extent, my views reflect the situation in my country. Yet whether the crisis is perceived to be isolated or acknowledged to pertain also to the church in other parts of the world, one thing is at least clear to me: There are powerful elements of the Bonhoeffer-Gudina legacy that can help us in responding to it.

The crisis, in brief, is this: There is a significant trend in the Christian community today to move away from the center in Jesus Christ. To be sure, Jesus plays a role, but primarily as a teacher of wisdom, a dispenser of good advice for living or an example to be emulated. At the academic level this new trend is represented by scholars of the "Jesus Seminar", a respected group of historical and linguistic experts who have set about to determine which of the "Jesus sayings" are authentic and which are not. For the Jesus Seminar, Jesus is a sage, a dispenser of "alternative wisdom (Sophia)"; but not the one in whose cross and resurrection there is any redeeming power. Clergy and lay leaders who ally themselves with the Jesus Seminar understand their roles, likewise, as dispensers of wisdom, providers of good advice and pastoral counsel that will help people to live happier lives.

On a more popular level, there is a widespread and growing group of Christians who believe that the significance of Jesus lies in his being a moral example for people to follow. The only question one needs to reflect upon in responding to ethical issues in life is this: "What would Jesus do?" In a sense this is the view of Jesus as moral example that was prevalent during the "social gospel movement" in the US in the early days of the twentieth century. Today the questions are, "Would Jesus go hunting?" and "Would Jesus drive an SUV?" (a large, gasoline consuming and very popular Sports Utility Vehicle)? Jesus, by such an understanding, is not the one who brings transformation through the power of the cross; Jesus is the one who tells us what to buy, how to drive and how to behave with members of the opposite sex.

## *2. The Response*

In response to this challenge, the Bonhoeffer-Gudina legacy offers a single, unequivocal answer. It does so, not only by focusing on the centrality of Jesus Christ within the biblical witness, in which the passion narrative and its meaning for the whole creation is dominant; it does so by demonstrating how the power of death and resurrection is the power of transformation and hope at the heart of individual and community life. Christ is not on the periphery, but at the center. Christ is not simply a fine after-dinner speaker in Jerusalem; Christ is the one who is the incarnation of the power of grace that is manifest in his own suffering and death. For Bonhoeffer and for Gudina alike, a Christ who offers simply wisdom, an example to be followed or a new set of ethical principles to live by, does not have the power to transform life. Nor does such a Christ, in the view of Bonhoeffer and Gudina, have the dignity to claim one's life.

What the church proclaims is the gospel, the good news that sin, guilt, alienation and hopelessness are conquered through the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It might be a stumbling block to some

and folly to others, but the church proclaims Christ crucified, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1: 24). Those who are part of the believing community, furthermore, are not called to simply give advice for living or offer a blueprint for a new social order; they are called to follow Christ by taking up the cross. They are called to live for others, suffer for others, die for others; they are called to live the words of Christ: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

### C. The Bonhoeffer-Gudina Legacy

#### 1. Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Those who knew Bonhoeffer in Berlin, Finkenwalde, New York and elsewhere have, since his death, compiled a treasury of theological reflections and personal remembrances. These have been preserved by the International Bonhoeffer Society which has affiliates in many countries. Similarly, there is a growing library of commentary and reflection on the life and ministry of Gudina Tumsa. Thanks to the work of the Gudina Tumsa Foundation, his legacy will be preserved for future generations of scholars, students and leaders of the church. Others will seek to draw more precise historical and theological connections between Bonhoeffer and Gudina. Yet there will always be one point of convergence between these two men that will stand out beyond all others: Their willingness to stand with their people and live out the meaning of the cross in a situation of great personal peril.

Bonhoeffer's second trip to the US was a brief one, a single month between June 7 and July 7, 1939. He had misgivings about traveling away from Germany, since he was a major leader among the pastors, even following the closure of the seminary at Finkenwalde. The outbreak of World War II was imminent with the invasion of Poland. Bonhoeffer feared that he would be inducted into the army and

needed to get away. Furthermore, he was taken up with the pacifist movement and wanted to learn more from his friends in the US about the meaning of "conscientious objection" to participating in war.

He was also under pressure from friends in the US to come and teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Towering figures in the theological community, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Lehmann, had secured a temporary position for him at Union, beginning in the summer of 1939. But they fully expected him to stay in the US indefinitely. But for Bonhoeffer the days in New York were filled with agonizing self-doubt and a lingering question, "What is God's will? Who is Christ for me in the moment?" The answer came to him during a visit to the summer home of Henry Sloan Coffin, Union's president:

Sitting here in Dr. Coffin's garden I have had the time to think and to pray about my situation and that of my nation, and to have God's will for me clarified. I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.<sup>35</sup>

The account of the decision of Gudina Tumsa to remain in Ethiopia in the face of clear threats against him has been recounted eloquently by Eide.<sup>36</sup> Knowing that Tumsa had strong international church ties, he was asked by the head of state, Mengistu Haile-Mariam, to take part in a tour of Europe as a goodwill ambassador for the Ethiopian revolution. Tesgara Hirpo recollects words of Gudina:

<sup>35</sup> Reist, p. 28

<sup>36</sup> Eide, pp. 175-79

He [Mengistu] wanted me to appear in media and confirm that there was religious freedom and no persecution in Ethiopia.<sup>37</sup>

After he declined, Gudina was arrested and taken to the People's Militia in Addis Ababa. Daughter Lensa was arrested also. She says,

They threatened to torture both of us as well as my mother. They were shocked when my father answered them that such a torture could make no difference. He could only tell the truth.<sup>38</sup>

It was then that Oberkirchenrat Christian Krause, alarmed by the imminent danger, alerted LWF President, Bishop Josiah Kibira of Tanzania. Together they traveled to Tanzania to speak with President Julius Nyerere who promised, not only to intervene with the Ethiopian authorities for Tumsa's release, but to offer him refuge in Tanzania as well.

Following his release from prison, Gudina was told about the plan to bring him to safety in Tanzania. In Krause's words:

What now followed had never happened before in our friendship. He yelled at me and said: "Here is my church and my congregation. How can I, as a church leader, leave my flock at this moment of trial? I have again and again pleaded with my pastors to stay on." He then quoted 2 Cor. 5:15: 'Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 176

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 176

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 177

2. Who am I?

The doctor assigned to the prisoners at Flossenber Concentration Camp, recalling the early morning hours of April 9, 1945, as several prisoners were taken from their cells for the final time, wrote:

Through the half-open door ... I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed, his death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.<sup>40</sup>

In his memoir, *Red Tears*, Dawit Wolde Giorgis, who was Deputy Chief of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Deputy Foreign Minister and later a member of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Ethiopia under Mengistu, recalls the killing of Gudina Tumsa:

In the anti-religious fanaticism people like Reverend Gudina Tumsa were executed...I remember seeing several Amnesty International appeals for Reverend Gudina's release from prison - but he never spent a day in prison. He was executed the day he was caught, in silent anonymity, as were so many others in Ethiopia before and after him. As always, incidents of this sort backfired, creating martyrs; and today more people go to church or mosque in Ethiopia than at any time in recent history.

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<sup>40</sup> Beihge, p.861

These experiences taught many of us in authority that the power of faith in Ethiopia was not so easily to be dismissed. Whether Christian, Moslem, or animist, religion formed a vital part of our people's identity and way of life. At a time when some of us were recognizing our failure to fulfill our people's hope of feeding themselves, of becoming self-sufficient and free from want, it was all the more morally outrageous to keep them from their only remaining hope and solace: the almighty God.<sup>41</sup>

When the news was received that Gudina Tumsa had been killed, there was a great outpouring of grief and anger. There was a sense of great relief that Tsehay Tolessa was safe, but a deep and lingering sense of loss, of emptiness that the great leader of the Mekane Yesus Church was dead. A memorial service was held at the Lutheran Center in New York. A phone call to the Ethiopian ambassador at the embassy in Washington, DC, the one to whom the leaders of the Lutheran churches had come to talk about the policies of the Mengistu government and about the safety of Gudina Tumsa and his family, went unanswered.

My most vivid recollection from that period, however, was that it was a time of intense soul-searching that went on for the colleagues in the Lutheran church in the United States and the agencies. It was not so much a questioning of whether we had spoken out enough in the face of the harassment and killing of so many people in Ethiopia.<sup>42</sup> We

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<sup>41</sup> Giorgis, Dawit Wolde, *Red Tears*, 1989, p. 125

<sup>42</sup> I would like to pay tribute to many in the U.S. churches who interceded for those imprisoned, among them, Dr. David Preus, Presiding Bishop of the American Lutheran Church, and Dr. Robert Marshall, Presiding Bishop of the Lutheran Church in America. Special mention needs to be made of the role of Rev. Roger Berg, pastor of Newport Harbor Lutheran Church in Newport Beach, California. With assistance from Lutheran World Ministries, Rev. Berg set up a fund and proceeded to extend invitations and round-trip air tickets to those in Ethiopia who

knew we had not done enough! Yet it was more a personal question: Who are we anyway? It was the question I asked myself: Who am I? What does my faith in Jesus Christ really mean when it counts? The words of protest and the words of solidarity come so easily, but for what am I willing to sacrifice? For what – and for whom – am I willing to live and die?

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were considered to be in life-threatening situations, allowing them and their families to leave the country.

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Papers by Yonas Deressa, Paul E. Hoffman, Øyvind M. Eide, Tesgara Hirpo, Gerd Decke and Debela Birri.

## **Discipleship and the Cross**

To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity. ... If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as ordinary everyday calamity. ... The Psalmist was lamenting that he was despised and rejected of men, and that is an essential quality of the suffering of the cross; the cross means sharing the suffering of Christ to the last and to the fullest. ... Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering, and gives them the grace of martyrdom, while others he does not allow to be tempted above that which they are able to bear. But it is the one and the same cross in every case.

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first suffering which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death- We give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not terrible end to an otherwise godfearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

Diedrich Bonhoeffer: **The Cost of Discipleship** (German: *Nachfolge*, 1937), Touchstone Books, 1995, p.88

RESPONSE:

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa: Some Personal Comments

by Hartwig Harms



Thank you for inviting me to respond to this great presentation by Dr. Paul Wee. I had the privilege of seeing the paper in advance. I learned a lot from it. It was a very personal presentation with a lot of information. It has enriched our thinking and our knowledge about Rev. Gudina Tumsa and Bonhoeffer. It also threw us into present challenges of church and society. It was a personal approach, and let me also use a personal approach.

My first closer encounter with Bonhoeffer was when I had to write a review of the great biography of Bonhoeffer by Eberhard Bethge. That was my first theological publication. Ever since I had followed the debate on Bonhoeffer, and the publications, and I have learned more about it. Of course I had already studied his works, some of them at least, during the time of my studies.

Three points have always interested me most in the theology of Bonhoeffer: The *first* is the warning that free grace must not become cheap grace, the great warning of "The Cost of Discipleship".

The *second* is Bonhoeffer's insistence that Christ calls us out of our natural fellowship into a personal relation to him, a personal response to him, but then he leads us again into a new and wider fellowship of the disciples, of Christ followers, and for the world.

Finally, the insistence of Bonhoeffer and his call and his ethics to a responsible life, to take up responsibilities also for dealing with the world, for obedience to God's Law. His theology served always for me as a corrective warning against the tendency to expect that out of faith in Christ automatically everything else would follow. We Lutherans are of nothing more afraid than of legalism. But love of God and of the neighbor also needs to be a conscious affair, and, to be done in accordance with God's will, love needs to be informed, and needs to take note and follow the commandments and law of God as revealed to us. That is what I have learned from Bonhoeffer.

My first encounter with Kes Gudina Tumsa was not very fortunate: When I should be introduced to him he had only half a minute time for me, that was 1972, when I was a fresh missionary. Also later he saw in me one of these stubborn Hermannsburg missionaries in the Western Synod, who, in the terminology of Rev. Øyvind Eide, defended "the periphery" against "the center", against the tendency of centralism.

The Aira station committee, of which I was a member, had, in line with the Western Synod policies, found a way around the Nedjo resolution to cut drastically the salaries of highly paid employees, which was one of the basic decisions of the Nedjo Assembly.

That would have meant for the hospital to lose its best national professionals and therefore to reduce its service. I had to defend our ways, our policies, at a meeting in Bodji. Kes Gudina was not at all amused about it. But not long after that there was a kind of breakthrough. I gave a Bible study on the Sermon on the Mount and in that took up the call against cheap grace. I quoted as a warning the example of the German Christians in the Third Reich, who sacrificed a clear confession in order to help the church survive in the time of Nazi ideology, going along with the state. This example was, of course, on the background of the Derg regime and on the willingness of some church leaders to make compromises. Kes Gudina, who was present, took up this example and gave further explanations, which made me realize that he had an intimate knowledge of German

History and of Bonhoeffer specifically. From that day onwards, he took notice of me. And we had a few good, very good conversations.

Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa; Both of them know that grace is not cheap; it was not cheap for our Lord and it is not for his followers. Both knew that discipleship has its price, and they willingly paid it. Their call to risk the price needs to be spelled out again. That is one of the three main points on which I would like now to concentrate, because we cannot cover all the richness of Dr. Paul Wee's presentation.

I see *first* a tendency in the churches to come to church and celebrate wonderful worship services, because they give release and make one feel very good. That has its right and its place. But how is it going on in life? Is there an over-spill into the family, into the neighborhood, into the working place? Are the believers only receiving something on Sunday, but also passing what they receive on to others?

The *second* point, which became important for me with both great men is that both of them struggled. Bonhoeffer had to reexamine his pacifist standpoint when he came in contact with the resistance group. That made him lonely.

Gudina Tumsa, as I experienced in some of the discussions, found it hard to make clear to the radical young Christians that they could join in condemning imperialism, colonialism and bureaucratic capitalism without compromising their faith and their solidarity with other Christians. Standing firm for Christ, without undergoing unnecessary risk, that was his line, that was his advice, and this was not always well and fully understood.

The *third* point I would like to pick out is that both Bonhoeffer and Gudina knew that Christians do not live for themselves. Faith which is only concerned with ourselves, or the church's internal affairs, is not the discipleship into which Christ has called us.

Bonhoeffer once said in a very famous phrase: "Only those who shout on behalf of the Jews are entitled to chant the Gloria," which

means “may edify themselves in worship.” This was when Jews were being persecuted, when the holocaust had not yet begun, but Jews were being made second-class citizens. Christians were also under pressure and had the tendency to keep quiet in order not to risk interrogation, detention and concentration camps.

So they didn’t speak out against oppression of their Jewish fellow citizens; that is what Bonhoeffer attacked. “We cannot keep quiet if our non-Christian brothers and sisters, if people of other tribes, other nations, are in problems.” Translated into the Ethiopian situation, this statement would read: “Only those who speak out for human rights, who speak against human rights violations, may sing Hallelujah!”

Gudina Tumsa clearly encourages us to uphold human rights, not only for ourselves, but also for the other people around, also those of other tribes. That is for me his legacy, both for our church and society, to stand firm against human rights violation of all people. Otherwise, God may say about the most exciting worship services: “Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen” (Amos 5:23). Struggle against injustice is to be the consequence of worship.

If these points would be accepted in all congregations and all our churches, both Bonhoeffer and Gudina Tumsa would see their intention, for which they paid dearly, implemented.