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## Craig J. Slane. *Bonhoeffer as Martyr: Social Responsibility and Modern Christian Commitment*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004. Pp. 256 (Paper).

[1] Several years ago I taught a senior undergraduate seminar on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and thought. Among the topics that interested the class the one which provoked the greatest amount of discussion and debate was the question: was Bonhoeffer a martyr? There were students who argued that he obviously was, and there were students who vehemently disagreed due to the more political nature of his death. I wish the class had had Craig Slane's book to assist them in their deliberations as it offers (1) a thorough survey of the various positions on the martyrdom question among Bonhoeffer scholars, (2) a more than adequate discussion of the nature of martyrdom as understood within the Christian tradition, (3) a "new" definition of martyrdom which entails both traditional and modern theological texts, (4) a fairly thorough examination of Bonhoeffer's life and theology in light of Slane's definition of martyrdom, and (5) an interesting hermeneutic of martyrdom that connects one's death with the meaningfulness of one's life. It is written in a manner that is accessible to any who have a year or two of theological training. All in all I would recommend this work for both upper level undergraduate and graduate students as well as scholars.

[2] Slane divides *Bonhoeffer as Martyr* into three main units: (1) the discussion of various ways of defining martyrdom within the Christian tradition and the development of his working definition using six chapters, (2) a hermeneutic of martyrdom, and (3) a re-reading of Bonhoeffer's life, particularly from Finkenwalde to Flossenbürg consisting of 4 chapters. Slane uses the first two chapters to place the martyrdom question in context by setting forth a number of problems raised by theologians. These include the possibility of a "secular" martyrdom as opposed to a religious one and the question as to whether Bonhoeffer's decision was based on his family heritage or his discipleship. It is the former problem that leads Slane into his next four chapters.

[3] These four chapters entail a fairly in-depth survey of classical and modern texts that attempt to define martyrdom. In these chapters Slane argues several of his main points in the text:

- martyrdom as understood in the early church is a form of *imitatio Christi*,

- martyrdom is an act of freedom and confession,
- one key to martyrdom is the life lived prior to the death and martyrdom is “a response to evil and the demonic” thereby allowing for a “political” martyrdom.

Slane then posits a series of benchmarks based upon H.A. Fischel’s study “Martyr and Prophet” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 37 (1946-1947) by which one can measure martyrdom. To these he adds two of his own which explicitly argue for a “secular/political” martyrdom. I include the first here as it clearly expresses a number of his main points:

*First, because by virtue of Christ a believer’s life is inextricably bound up with other lives, he may, under certain oppressive conditions, and with reasoned Christian convictions, enter freely into the political arena under the calculation that while he may be gravely endangering his own future, the futures of others might be improved. Should that person suffer death in the process, he becomes a martyr, for he has imitated Christ by laying down his life for his friends [italics Slane’s] (74).*

[4] As good as Part One is in treating the questions inherent in the Bonhoeffer as martyr discussion, it is in Part Two “Interpretive Prospects of Martyrdom” that the true center of this text rests. Drawing upon the work of Heidegger’s “Being-Unto-Death” and notion of “authentic existence” as well as Karl Rahner’s notion of Christian death as a “freely exercised liberty of faith,” Slane develops a hermeneutic of martyrdom that is useful in defining and describing the nature of a faithful life towards death; i.e. “the death of martyrdom offers the highest potential for understanding the coherence of Christian life” (138). Implicit in this is the connection between responsibility for others, particularly the oppressed, and an authentic existence in faith. It is one’s death that gives meaning to one’s life, much as Christ’s death gives meaning to human life (or so, for instance Wolfhart Pannenberg); and, alas, one cannot therefore know the meaning of one’s life and death. Only those who follow can make such an assessment. Yet even that must be a tentative assessment, as one’s life and death fit into a larger picture, which is itself not yet complete. Thus Slane leaves the question of Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom somewhat open-ended, even as he argues for the appropriateness of the term martyrdom in Bonhoeffer’s case.

[5] The interest of our investigation is of course the significance of Bonhoeffer’s death for Bonhoeffer’s life, but whatever that significance turns out to be, it must be defensible on some deeper ground. Just as the totality of a human life cannot be assessed within its peculiar history, neither can total historical description of that life be realized within history. The meaning of a life cannot be pinned down in its temporal trajectory but must be “settled”, . . . from a standpoint “after the fact” (131). All of this connects the individual Christian’s life and death with that of Christ’s and the future fulfillment in the Kingdom of God.

[6] In Part Three Slane uses his hermeneutic of martyrdom to interpret Bonhoeffer’s Christology and ethics, particularly as embedded and exemplified in his community development at Finkenwalde. This he describes as Bonhoeffer’s *praxis*. Though this part of the text provides a reasonable interpretation of Bonhoeffer’s *Discipleship* and *Ethics* as they relate to his interest in Christian community and experimentation with such at Finkenwalde,

I found it somewhat anticlimactic, in that much of it was foreshadowed in the previous two parts.

[7] In the end I believe that Craig J. Slane has provided both scholars of Bonhoeffer and scholars of martyrs and martyrdom with some new insights for consideration. I particularly find the hermeneutic of martyrdom to be one worth developing - perhaps drawing the process theology of Whitehead, Hartshorne and Griffin into the conversation. Slane's hermeneutic can go a long way towards moving theology beyond notions of Christian life, death, and faith, which are closed and set in stone, towards notions that are open to conversation with the secular world. My only disappointment with the text is that, having been written and published after September 11, 2001, there is not even an attempt to consider the ramifications of his concept of political/religious martyrdom for religions other than Christian; i.e. Islam. It would make for an interesting study.

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